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THE GAMBLER PIRATE; or, Bessie, the Lady of the Lagoon.

A COMPANION STORY TO THE "SKELETON SCHOONER."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT,"
"WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL," ETC., ETC.



"HOLD! CAPTAIN FORRESTER. SURRENDER OR YOU DIE!" "GOD ABOVE! YOU RISEN FROM THE SEA, MABEL MORTIMER!"

The Gambler Pirate:

OR,

Bessie, the Lady of the Lagoon.

A Companion Story to "The Skeleton Schooner."

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AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LADY OF THE LAGOON.

A TRIM-LOOKING sail-boat was skimming over the waters of Mississippi Sound, and heading directly for a point of land a mile distant, and which jutted out from the shore in the shape of a horn, the curve being inward and forming a small harborage.

Upon the deck of the little yacht were four persons, three in the garb of common seamen, and the other in an undress uniform.

The latter stood in the bow, leaning against the mast, and was gazing through his glass at the distant point which was fringed with magnolia and pine trees, and sheltered in their depths a pretty little cabin, painted white.

Upon the porch of the little cabin cottage, —for such it was—sat a young and beautiful girl, engaged in embroidering some article of apparel.

Her face was exquisitely lovely in feature, and yet was bold and resolute in expression—not the boldness that marks forwardness, but which denoted a spirit that had never been broken, a heart that knew no fear.

Her hair was golden, and was worn in simple braids, and her dress was pure white, of some soft material, and was short, displaying her shapely little feet and well-turned ankles.

Her hands were also extremely small, but like her face, burned brown by the sea breezes that were constantly wafted landward.

Her form was slightly above the average height of women, well-knitted, graceful, and yet denoted strength and endurance.

The house was a rude yet pretty one, furnished with ships' furniture, the interior of the cabin and the surroundings, however, showing that a woman's hand was over all, for flowers, vines and cosey seats were seen here and there, and the house was most tidy throughout, and ornamented with many a little comfort the fair young girl had made.

Glancing up from her work, the maiden's dark eyes caught sight of the distant sail, and instantly she started to her feet, crying:

"Why that is the yacht from The Everglades, and it is heading directly for the Shark's Back."

"Surely Mark Mortimer cannot be at her helm, for he would know his danger."

She threw aside her work, seized from a bracket near the door a ship's spy-glass, and turned it upon the coming boat, which was still heading for the sunken reef known as the "Shark's Back," to those along the coast.

"No, it is not Mark, and yet it is his boat, the Water Spirit."

"There are three seamen in the boat, and one in uniform."

"Well, whoever they are, I must aid them, for if the boat holds her present course a minute longer she will strike and go to pieces."

Laying aside the spy-glass, without hat or wrap, just as she was, she darted down toward the water's edge, where were several boats of various sizes lying upon the white beach, and a sloop of some twenty tons anchored off the shore about half a dozen fathoms distant.

To one of the boats—a long, narrow, deep, but very lightly built skiff—she went, and with a strength one would not have suspected of her, shoved it into the water.

Upon one side of the gunwales was lashed a mast and sprit-sail, and upon the other a pair of oars, while a rudder with tiller-ropes was lying aft.

To step the mast, ship the rudder, set the sail, and, sitting down amidships, to seize the tiller-ropes, was not an instant's work for her, and feeling the breeze, which was fresh, the surf-skiff darted across the basin, rounded the point, and headed out into deep water, her destinies guided by one upon whose life a mystery hung—one known along the coast as Bessie Gito, the Lady of the Lagoon.

CHAPTER II.

BESSIE AT BAY.

THE man in officer's undress uniform, who stood in the forward part of the little craft, whose course had so alarmed Bessie Gito, was a man of striking presence.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, small-waisted, with the look of a giant in strength and a woman in gentleness.

He wore a full, dark-brown beard, but yet sufficient of his face was revealed to show that it was handsome, resolute and refined, while in his dark eyes seemed to "hover continually a smile which lighted up his countenance greatly.

His arms were folded upon his broad breast, when he was not looking through his glass at the little cabin on shore, or really trying to see the face of the maiden who sat there on the piazza; and he seemed to enjoy the beauty of the scenery as the yacht bounded on.

But presently his quick eye caught sight of a shadow in the water ahead, and he turned to the one of the three seamen who had the helm and said:

"Marco, you are sure you know the waters in here?"

"Yes, señor," was the reply.

"It looks like a shoal ahead," continued the officer.

"Yes, señor, there are shoals off this point, but we can go through the channels."

"And yonder is the home of Juan Gito?"

"Yes, señor."

"I hope he is there, after my running in here off my course to see him, for I should hasten on to my vessel with all speed."

"If he is not, señor, his pretty daughter is," answered the man with a smile.

"I have no time to while away now even with a beautiful woman, Marco, and I have heard that Gito's daughter was beautiful, and that he guarded her as sacredly as a nun."

"She is known along the coast, señor, as the Lady of the Lagoon, and a fine lady she is, for Juan Gito has had her at a convent in New Orleans the past five years, getting her education, though her father is but a poor fisherman."

"Yes, only a poor fisherman," answered the officer with a significant manner, and he turned to walk back toward the stern when his eyes fell upon the little surf-skiff suddenly darting around the point.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, as he steadied himself once more and raised the glass to his eyes to level it upon the little boat.

But as he did so there came a tremendous shock, a crashing sound, and he was thrown violently to the deck, and very nearly overboard.

Then came the cry:

"Now, lads, he is our game!"

With one accord the three men sprung forward and upon the prostrate, half-stunned man, and although he was surprised and taken wholly unawares at this attack of his crew, he met them bravely.

But they were ready for the work on hand, and after a short struggle the officer was ironed and also bound securely.

"Hounds! what means this outrage?" he cried, his eyes flashing fire as he was dragged aft and thrown in the cock-pit, while the men went forward to clear the wreck, for the mast had gone down with the shock, and the little craft had driven straight and hard upon the Shark's Back, and remained there as firmly as though a part of the reef itself.

The man who had been steering, and whom his officer addressed as Marco, replied:

"It means, señor, that we know you as you are, and we laid this plot to get you into our power, and win the price offered on your head."

"Devils!" said the officer through his closed teeth.

"Oh you can curse us, señor, but the gold we get for you will make all that seem like your blessing."

"We knew your schooner had gone into the Black Lagoon for repairs, and that you were visiting at The Everglades plantation, so we just set our trap, by telling you that your first luff had sent us for you, and thereby got you into our power."

"And to do so, you have run this yacht upon a reef, and how you are to get ashore I would like to know," said the prisoner, whose free-and-easy air had come back to him.

"Ah, that's a part of our plan, señor, for do you see yonder lagoon, putting in to the left of the point?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, in there lies our little sloop, with two of our mates on board, and it will soon put out, as soon as they see us, and taking us off, sail for New Orleans."

"I was afraid to take you inshore, as some of the fishermen might rescue you, for they say you have allies all along the coast, so we stuck here, to await the coming of our little craft."

The man then turned quickly, for he caught sight of the coming surf-skiff and cried:

"Who in thunder is that?"

"It is a woman sailing the craft," answered one of his comrades.

All eyes were now turned upon the surf-skiff, which was now very near the wrecked yacht, and luffing up within easy hail, there came the words, in a clear, ringing, yet sweet voice:

"Ho the wreck! you will have to jump overboard and swim to me for me to save you, for I dare not come nearer the rocks with this sea running."

"We don't want any help, thank you, miss, for we have a craft inshore that will soon see us and take us off," answered Marco.

"But I do need help, miss, for these wretches have mutinied and have me in irons," called out the prisoner in manly tones.

The maiden looked surprised, gazed an instant at the four men, and, in spite of the others holding him back, the prisoner arose and showed her that he was manacled and bound.

Instantly she arose and unshipped her little mast, and laying it, with its furled sail, in the boat, seized the oars, and with her face toward the wreck, began to draw near the reef, and under the lee of the little craft, for the approach from windward would have been madness; and, as it was, the sea was very wild, foam breaking over the rocks, and forming a caldron beneath.

"This man is a pirate, miss, and we are officers of the law who have taken him prisoner," cried out Marco.

"It is not the truth, Miss Gito, for I am Frank Forrester, a yachtsman, a guest at The Everglades plantation up the coast, and a friend of your father!" called out the prisoner.

"Are you Captain Forrester of the yacht Jack-o-lantern?" asked Bessie Gito, with considerable interest.

"I am," was the response.

"Where did you know my father?" she asked.

"I saved his life in Mobile a year ago, the first time I met him, and since then we have often met."

"True, sir, and I will now serve you."

"Men, you are mistaken, for that gentleman is not the one you say he is," firmly said Bessie, drawing slowly nearer to the yacht.

"He is Forrester, the Freebooter, miss, and we are not to be cheated out of our game."

"We have tracked him for a long time, and played a bold game to get him, and don't intend to give him up."

The maiden made no reply, but with a vigorous pull at her oars, sent her light skiff through the seething caldron of waters to the bows of the yacht, which had sprung clear over the reef.

Instantly she had seized hold of the bowsprit, made the painter fast, and springing on board of the shattered craft, before the surprised and startled seamen could prevent, had faced them.

They had let go their hold upon their prisoner, whom they were forcing down in the cockpit, to meet the daring girl, and were horrified to see that she had in her hand a duck-gun, which she had taken from the surf-skiff, and held it covering them.

"Into the cabin, men, or I fire on you!" she cried, in ringing tones.

The three seamen were thunderstruck at this bold proceeding.

They had risked their lives to capture a man who, they had asserted, was sailing under false colors as a yachtsman, when he was in reality none other than Forrester, the Freebooter.

Under fair circumstances they had not dared attack him, for they cared not to wound or kill him, and they had run the yacht on a reef to spring upon him under the excitement of the pretended mishap.

Now, a young girl held them at her mercy, for they had only their knives with them, their pistols being in their belts in the cabin of the little craft.

"Here, girl, you are a-playing a bad game, which you shall suffer for," cried Marco, threateningly.

"You shall suffer, now, sir, if you do not obey me."

"Into that cabin, the three of you, or I fire!"

They saw in her face that she meant every word she said, and by one accord, they bolted into the cabin, intending to get their fire-arms and make matters more equal.

But, with the spring of a panther, seemingly having detected their intention, she was at the companionway, and closing the little doors, bolted them quickly, while she cried:

"Now, sir, come with me, and lose no time, for it will not take those men long to break out!"

CHAPTER III.

THE RESCUE.

It was the first time in his life that Frank Forrester had been at the mercy of a woman, and dependent upon her for his life.

His hands were ironed, and the key to unloose them was in the possession of his foe in the cabin.

His arms were also bound at the elbow, so that he was almost helpless.

Bessie Gito led him along the deck, dragged the surf-skiff under the bowsprit, and aided him into it, though with great peril to herself and the man she risked her life to rescue.

Springing into the boat herself, she unfastened the painter, and a wave dashed it off from the rock, and like a feather in a mill-race it danced upon the cauldron of waters.

But, undismayed, the fair Lady of the Lagoon stepped her tiny mast, spread her little sail, and seated amidships as before, while the yachtsman crouched in the stern, she scudded for shore before the stiff breeze.

Hardly had the skiff gotten a dozen lengths from the wrecked yacht, when a crash was heard on board, and the companionway doors flying open under the shock, out bounded the three seamen, their pistols in their hands.

Loud and deep were their curses, when they saw that their prisoner had escaped them, and raising their weapons, two of them fired at the occupants of the flying boat, while the third darted again into the cabin and returned with a gun, which he pointed at the young girl, while he cried sternly:

"Put that skiff about and run back, or I fire."

Clear and ringing came the reply of the young girl:

"I shall not obey you, so fire!"

The gun flashed, and the bullet struck in the mast just above Bessie's head, but she did not flinch.

"Put about, miss, and give me up to them, for he may harm you," urged the yachtsman. Bessie smiled, and replied:

"If I did such a cowardly thing as that I would not be worthy to live."

"No, I do not believe the charges these men made against you; and I shall save you—oh, see that craft, coming out of the lagoon."

She pointed to a small sloop, painted black, and with well-worn sails, which was being poled out of the mouth of a lagoon a mile away, by two men, all that were visible upon her decks.

"It is the craft those rascals spoke of, and they will run us down," coolly said the prisoner.

"She entered the lagoon then at night, for no vessel can go in by day, and father or myself not see it; but they will not catch us."

"I fear they will," answered Frank Forrester; and he added:

"They are signaling them from the wreck."

"Yes, they will run out there first, and may then come ashore and attempt to take you; but we have arms in the cottage, and I know how to use them," was the plucky response of the young girl.

"You are risking too much on my account, and I cannot permit you to thus sacrifice yourself for me, and while I am bound like a dog, unable to strike in my own defense," he said, bitterly.

"Oh! I guess we can find something to get those irons off with when we reach the cabin."

"In my inmost heart I hope so, and then I will defend myself and you too, if need be."

"See, the sloop, as you thought, is going out to the wreck."

The little craft having gotten out of the lagoon, and felt the breeze, had shaped her course for the wreck.

In the mean time the surf-skiff held on toward the point, and rounded it into the little harbor, just as the sloop luffed up as near as it dare go, under the lee of the reef upon which the yacht had run.

"Now, sir, come to the cabin and let me get those irons off for you," said Bessie, as she ran the skiff ashore, and sprung out herself.

Frank Forrester followed, and he seemed to forget his danger, as he went along, in contemplating the scene of beauty around him, from the flower-clothed lawn and yard to the comfortable little cabin.

Entering the house, Bessie's first duty was to bring out a number of guns and pistols, and place them by the front door, after which she looked to see that they were loaded and primed.

"Now, sir, I will see about those irons, she said, as she barred the windows, and taking a bunch of keys from a drawer, she tried to find something to unfasten the manacles with.

But each key was tried in vain, and unable to pick the lock, she seemed at a loss what to do, but said, quickly:

"You see the sloop is coming ashore, and I will have to defend you alone."

"No, I will not submit to it, but go back into the forest, and when I am gone they surely will not harm you," said the man.

"No, for I believe I can get those irons off," and she went into an adjoining room, and soon returned with a large file.

At her request he laid his hands upon the table, and she began her tedious work, for tedious indeed it was.

But she filed hard, ever and anon glancing up to look at the sloop, which was heading in toward the basin.

Nearer and nearer came the sloop, and harder and harder Bessie plied away at the oars, her face aglow, her eyes sparkling, and her lips set with determination.

Down into the iron ate the file, and when half-way through the stubborn manacles, the sloop rounded the point, the same man at her helm who had run the yacht on the surf.

"I know that man you call Marco," said Bessie, gazing at him through the open door, as he stood at the sloop's tiller, steering her to an anchorage close inshore.

"Who is he?" asked Frank Forrester.

"A fisherman who hates my father and myself."

"He has shaved his beard off and cut his hair close since I saw him last; but I recognize him now, and when he left a year ago, he swore to be avenged."

"What cause had he?" asked the yachtsman.

Bessie blushed, but answered:

"Ah, he wanted me to marry him, and because I would not, changed his pretended love to hate."

"But, now, by capturing me, and proclaiming me a pirate, could he avenge himself upon you?"

"You may not know that men tell strange stories of my father, because we happen to live here all alone?" she said.

"Indeed! what stories can they tell?" asked the prisoner in surprise.

"There are pirates and smugglers said to be in these waters, and my father is said to be in league with them by those who dislike him."

"But they do not know my father who say such cruel things of him."

"Yes, I have heard that pirates had their haunts on this coast, and, in fact, while cruising about have seen their vessels."

"Did you ever see the Skeleton Cruiser?" quickly asked Bessie.

"Yes."

"By day?"

"No, it was by night."

"Ah! then trouble will come to you they say, and I also dread sorrow to our little home, as one night not long ago, I beheld the Skeleton Schooner sail by a league distant, and you know they say that if that weird craft crosses the path of any one they are doomed to suffer in some way, or die."

"Yes, I have heard such stories regarding the strange craft."

"I hope no sorrow will come to you or to father, but see, I have nearly freed you from this iron band."

"Yes, and there come our foes, not a hundred paces away," was the calm reply of the yachtsman.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ATTACK.

"Ho! within there!"

The hall rung out sternly, in the voice of Marco, the man who had attempted the capture of the yachtsman, whom he accused of being a pirate.

"Ay, ay, what is wanted?" answered Bessie Gito from within the stout little cottage, working with all her will with the file to free the man she had saved.

"I want that pirate you are hiding here, Bessie Gito, and if you do not surrender him to us you will get yourself into trouble, and I guess you'll see your father swing too," was the gruff reply.

"My home is locked up, and I warn you not to attempt to break in, for I shall defend it," was the bold retort.

"Give us the prisoner, and we'll say no more."

"Look for him elsewhere than here."

"Do you mean that he is not in there?"

Bessie answered this question *a la Yankee*, by asking another:

"Do you think I would be so silly as to bring a man here for safety, when I knew you would come to demand him?"

"Girl, I watched with a glass and I saw him enter this cabin with you, and I will have him, for I tell you he is Forrester, the Freebooter, and there is a heavy price on his head."

"Now open this door, or I break it down."

"Look here, Mark Odell, I know you even under your name of Marco, and with your beard shaved off and hair cut, and you know me, so I beg you to take warning and leave here," said Bessie firmly.

The man flinched as she called his name, and still filing away, with her eye at a lookout hole, she saw it.

"Well, you know me too, Bessie Gito, and must remember that I am one to git what I set my heart on," was the dogged reply.

She laughed lightly, and answered in a significant tone which he understood well the meaning of, for he muttered an oath:

"Not always, Mark Odell."

"Girl, I will stand no trifling, so I demand that you unbolt this door and let us search your cabin."

"We will not take any of the smuggled goods your father has stored away, and if we do not find our man, then no harm is done."

"There, you are free," muttered Bessie, in a low tone, to the yachtsman, and in a loud voice she called out:

"You have my answer, so the result be upon your own head, if you attempt to back in."

"So be it, my girl."

"Here, lads, pick up that spar, yonder, and use it as a battering-ram against this door."

The entire force had come from the sloop, so that they all took up the spar and retreating with it some fifty feet began to move at a swift trot toward the cabin, the smaller end being aimed directly at the stout door.

It was some thirty feet long, a foot in diameter at the larger end, and would have soon battered in the door.

But as they moved rapidly forward with it, Bessie's voice rung out threateningly:

"Hold! if you advance nearer I fire!"

They did halt, but their leader cried to them not to fear a girl's warning, and they started ahead once more.

But when within fifteen feet of the door, there came a report and the man nearest the cabin fell dead in his tracks.

Quickly the others dropped the spar, even to Mark Odell, and scampered to the nearest trees for safety.

"Now, Bess Gito, you have done that which will place your pretty neck in a noose," yelled Mark Odell.

A ringing laugh was the reply, and it so infuriated the leader of the assailants, that he called out:

"Boys, don't let the girl shoot us down and then laugh at us."

"Come, the man we seek is in that cabin, and in irons, so he is of no use, and we have only a girl to defeat."

"Come, follow me!"

They gave a cheer and darted forward at his words.

But, as they came within ten feet of the cabin, the door was suddenly thrown open, and in it stood the tall form of the yachtsman, a large dragoon pistol in either hand.

"Come on, you hounds, if you seek me," he cried in ringing tones.

And, as he spoke he fired two shots, others followed from the assailants, and when the cloud of smoke rose above the cabin and drifted away three men lay dead, and two others were flying at full speed for the shore.

One of those two was Mark Odell, and the other was one of his comrades, while the man they sought stood outside the cabin coolly looking at their flight, and with a smile upon his handsome face, while in the doorway behind him was Bessie, a pistol in one hand and cutlass in the other.

CHAPTER V.

JUAN GITO.

FRANK FORRESTER the yachtsman, whose deadly aim had brought down three of his assailants, and put the others to flight, made no effort to follow them, but quietly stood by the cabin and saw them go on board their little sloop and set sail.

"I hope this affair will not cause you any trouble, Miss Gito," he said, in the courtly way that seemed natural to him.

"Oh no, sir, for I think Mark Odell will remember his reception here too vividly to care for a repetition of it," answered Bessie.

"I owe you far more, sweet Bessie, than I can ever regret, for you have saved me from the gallows," he said earnestly.

"Oh no, sir, for surely you could have proven your innocence when brought before the proper authorities."

He flushed and added quickly:

"Yes, oh yes, I forgot that they were not to be my judges.

"But, Miss Gito, I am anxious to continue on my way to my vessel, whither I was going when those wretches wrecked my craft.

"I was desirous of seeing your father upon a matter of business, and so came inshore to hail him."

"My father is away at present, sir, but I expect him back at any time."

"Pray tell me, can I not charter one of his sail-boats to run on to my vessel, for it is urgent that I proceed at once."

"Where is your vessel, sir?"

"Near the Black Lagoon, undergoing repairs."

"I thought your yacht was at anchor off The Everglades plantation?" said Bessie inquisitively.

"No, my vessel, as I said, is near the Black Lagoon."

"That is a dangerous locality, sir, for they say pirates have their haunts there."

"True, and that is why I am anxious to get there at once."

Bessie was silent a moment, and then she said:

"My father will surely be here by sunset, sir; but if he is not I will run you to your vessel in my own little sail-boat."

"You?" he queried in surprise.

"Yes, sir," she answered with a smile.

"Ah, yes, I remember now to have heard that fair Bessie, the Lady of the Lagoon, is a born sailor, and knows this coast as well as any pilot."

"My father has made a sailor of me, sir, since I was a very little girl, and I have studied navigation from a love of it—but there comes my father."

He glanced in the direction her eyes were turned, and saw a cat-rigged boat coming down the coast before the wind.

In the stern sat a single occupant, and he handled the little craft with the skill of one born on the water, running into the little harbor and alongside the floating log dock in a manner that showed long practice in just such work.

They remained at the cabin awaiting him, and soon he came forward, started at seeing the three dead bodies, and then rapidly walked toward his daughter, crying eagerly:

"Bessie, my child, what does this mean?"

The speaker was a man of supple build, with a dark, stern face, stamped with an air of refinement, and with a mien strangely dignified and courtly for one of his humble calling, for he was known along the coast as Gito, the Lagoon Fisherman, though there were some who hinted that he knew more of velvets, laces and wines than he did of fish; but these suspicious persons were cautious about saying such things where they could reach his ears, as Juan Gito was no man to trifle with, or to brook interference with his affairs.

He was dressed in dark pants, low shoes, a sailor shirt with broad collar, under which was a black silk neckerchief, and upon his head was a tarpaulin.

His appearance was that of a dandy sailor, to which his wearing an opal pin in his black silk scarf, and a ruby ring of rare beauty and value upon the little finger of his left hand, added greatly.

About his waist was a belt with a gold buckle studded with precious stones, and his weapons were a long-bladed poniard and a pistol.

"It means, father," answered Bessie, in reply to his question, "that I saw yonder yacht running upon Shark's Back reef, and stood out to the aid of its crew."

"They proved to be men enlisted for a yachting cruise, who fancied that in this gentleman they had found Forrester, the Freebooter, and they had him in irons; but he told me he was Captain Forrester, of the yacht Jack-o'-lantern, and as you told me once how he saved your life, I took him away from his captors, the leader of whom was none other than Mark Odell."

"Ha! I hoped that that fellow was at the bottom of the sea."

"But you did well, Bessie, and the debt I owe Captain Forrester is returned."

"I am glad to see you, sir, once more, but Bessie's story does not explain the presence of these three dead men."

Juan Gito spoke in a quick, decided way, and with a slight foreign accent.

Offering his hand as he spoke to Captain Forrester, the latter grasped it, and then explained the attack of his foes upon his cabin, adding:

"And yonder flies their sloop seaward."

"A league and a half away."

"I have half a mind to give chase and prevent any more deviltry being perpetrated by Mark Odell," and the eyes of the fisherman flashed.

"No, let him go, for doubtless we will meet again; but now, Senor Gito, I came by here to have a talk with you about getting me a few good men for my vessel, and, as the yacht loaned me by Mr. Mortimer of The Everglades, is wrecked, I shall have to ask you to sail me to the Black Lagoon, where my craft awaits me."

Juan Gito looked squarely in the face of the speaker for an instant and then said:

"I will sail you there, sir."

"At once?"

"Is it urgent?"

"Yes."

"Then I will be ready as soon as I throw those carcasses into the sea, that the tide may take them off."

"And can I accompany you, father?" asked Bessie.

"No, my child, I go alone with this gentleman," was the almost stern reply, and ten minutes after Bessie stood on the cliff watching the little boat fly away over the waters, while the rays of the setting sun falling upon her hair made it look like threads of pure gold.

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERY UNSOLVED.

AFTER watching the little vessel of her father glide swiftly away, Bessie turned to glance down the coast, and was startled by seeing a yacht lying near the wreck on Shark's Back reef.

It was one of the small pleasure boats of The Everglades, and in it, even at that distance, Bessie recognized a familiar form, while the other two, for there were three occupants, were negroes.

She saw the little skiff put the master of The Everglades upon the wreck, and watched him while he remained on board for a few moments.

Then he returned to his little craft, which at once put away for Gito Haven, as the Fisherman's harbor was called.

It was twilight when the yacht rounded to in the harbor, and a young man sprung into the light skiff in tow and rowed himself ashore.

He ascended to the ridge, upon which stood the cabin and was met by Bessie, who said rather coldly:

"This visit is an honor, Mr. Mortimer."

"Don't be sarcastic, Bessie, for I have been too busy to come of late," he answered, lightly.

He was a handsome man of perhaps twenty-one, but he appeared older, and there rested upon his face a look of reckless dissipation.

He was well dressed, had an aristocratic, but haughty air, and was one to attract attention almost anywhere.

Petted by his father, who had been killed in a duel a short time before, by the master of Lakelands, the adjoining plantation, with no mother to influence him, Mark Mortimer had grown up from boyhood unchecked in his wild career, and was little fitted to be the guardian of his beautiful young sister Mabel, some years his junior.

He had some time before been on a lagoon in his boat, and had saved Bessie Gito from being torn to pieces by alligators, when she had daringly forced her horse into the water to swim across, and since that meeting they had been more than friends.

"If you have been busy, Mr. Mortimer, I suppose I must excuse your long absence; but I have not seen you since—" she paused, but he continued without hesitating:

"Since young Percy Wyndham killed my father in a duel, and I in return kept the vendetta ball rolling by killing his father."

"It was fearful," she said with a shudder.

"Which? That Percy Wyndham should kill my father, or that I should kill his father?" he asked with a sneer.

"Both, for it is strange that your family and his cannot live in unity."

"Bah! it is an old feud, begun before I was born between our fathers, and left to the sons to continue."

"But you will not continue the vendetta?" she urged.

"Why not? There is bad blood between the names of Wyndham and Mortimer, and it might as well be let out; but it is for Percy Wyndham to act now, for if he killed my father, I returned the compliment, avenging Major Mortimer by the death of Captain Wyndham.

"Do you see, Bessie?"

"I should think that Mr. Percy Wyndham's last act would have wiped out the past."

"What was that, sweet Bess?"

"Saving your sister from those who would have kidnapped her."

"Hal who told you of this?" he exclaimed quickly.

"My father heard of it and told me."

"Ah, yes; and now, Bessie, I have come to ask your father to aid in the search for my poor sister's body," he said sadly.

"What! Is Miss Mortimer dead?"

"Yes, or rather we believe so, for she disappeared suddenly last night from home, and an upturned boat, in which was her hat, was drifted ashore, and we feel that she has been lost, for a storm came up at night which evidently blew the little craft out to sea with her."

"This is fearful, Mark, and in my inmost heart I feel for you, for your mother, father, sister all are gone now," and she laid her hand upon his arm, as the two stood before the cabin.

"Yes, I am alone in the world now, and Fate seems to have hit me hard; but tell me, Bessie, did you see yonder craft run on the Shark's Back?"

"Yes."

"It is the Water Spirit, one of my yachts."

"So I know, as you have sailed here in her."

"What sent her on the reef?"

In a few words Bessie told him all.

"Well, I am glad that Forrester escaped; but how strange that those wretches should take him for a pirate, when he is a man of wealth, cruises in his yacht for pleasure, and is one of the best fellows in the world."

"You say he has gone on to his vessel?"

"Yes, so he said."

"At the Black Lagoon?"

"Yes."

"That is strange, for the Jack-o'-lantern, his yacht, sailed for New Orleans last night on special service, and some of Captain Forrester's men came to The Everglades after him to-day and he started to Mobile, as I understood him, upon important business, and I let him take the Water Spirit."

"This is indeed strange," said Mark Mortimer, apparently in a quandary.

"Yes, it is mysterious," answered Bessie, and more regarding Frank Forrester she could not tell.

CHAPTER VII.

A BITTER BLOW.

FOR an instant Mark Mortimer stood in silence, and Bessie entered the cottage and lighted a lamp, for darkness had come on.

"Come in, Mark, and may I offer you a cup of tea?" she called out.

"No, Bessie, I am in no humor for a cup of even your good tea," he answered as he entered the sitting-room of the cabin.

It had, when in it, the appearance of a ship's cabin, rather than a house, for the furniture had all of it done service at some time on board some vessel.

But it did not look out of place, and with her skill with needle, paint brush and art, she had made the house a most attractive and cosey one.

While Bessie sat down in an easy chair, the young master of The Everglades paced to and fro with thoughtful brow, and the maiden was silent, for she believed his thoughts were with his lost sister.

But presently he stopped in front of her and asked abruptly:

"Bessie, what did you think of Frank Forrester?"

"How mean you, Mark?"

"Did you like him?"

"Yes, he appeared very much the gentleman, and is certainly a very brave man."

"You did him a good turn, from your account?"

"I told you just what occurred, Mark, with no desire to praise myself."

"He must be very grateful to you."

"He so expressed himself."

"Is he a man you could love, Bessie?"

"I am not fickle, Mark."

"But if you had not met me, for I know your remark refers to me."

"Perhaps I could have loved him, for he is a very fascinating man, I should think; but I am so constituted, Mark, that I could *love* but one man, no matter how many more I might regard with friendship and admiration."

"And that one you have met, Bessie?"

"You should not ask that, Mark."

"And love?"

"You know that, Mark," she said softly, and with some reproach in her tone.

"I am sorry," he said in an embarrassed way.

She rose to her feet and faced him, while she asked:

"You are sorry, Mark?"

"Yes."

"Sorry that I love you?"

"Yes."

She turned deadly pale, but continued to look him squarely in the face, while she asked in a husky voice:

"Why, Mark Mortimer, are you sorry that you have won my love?"

"Because, Bessie—because, I cannot love you as you deserve to be loved," he answered uneasily.

"Do you mean that you do not love me, Mark, or fear that you do not love me enough in return for the idolatrous love I have given you?" she asked pleadingly, ready to forgive him, or catch at a ray of hope.

"I mean, Bessie, that I do not love you."

"Not love me?"

"Oh yes, as I would a friend, but not as I should love a wife."

"Yet I am your wife, Mark?" she said in a low tone.

"Bessie, don't look so wild, and yet keep so calm, but hear me."

"I did think I loved you, and I do still love you as a friend; but the fact is, I know that I have not the regard for you I should have for one I made my wife, one who was my equal in birth."

She was livid now, but strangely calm, though her blue eyes had become black with slumbering fire, and in a proud tone she said:

"Mark Mortimer, blood older and prouder flows in my veins than in yours, for though my father is a poor fisherman now, he is still a Spanish noble, exiled by his king, and held high power in old Spain before he was banished for an act his fiery temper caused him to commit."

"You may not love me, sir, but do not say that I am not your equal, for I am your *superior* in birth."

He quailed under her scathing words and looks, and could not but remember how often he had wondered at Juan Gito's eloquence and education, and told Bessie that no fair maid of the land was more beautiful, or haughty in manner.

But he had decided upon his course and was determined to carry it out, so replied:

"Well, Bessie, in spite of your noble blood, I do not love you."

"You should have discovered that, sir, before you gave me the name you have withheld from me for months, causing me to keep the secret of our marriage from my father and the world through some whim of your own."

He assumed a laugh that was not honest, and answered:

"Bessie, I acted for good reasons."

"Name them."

"First, we were not really married."

She uttered no word and only gazed at him.

He feared she was about to faint, for she swayed from side to side, but when he sprung forward, as though to catch her, she stood like a statue, and waved him back with the words, spoken in hoarse tones:

"Don't touch me, Frank Mortimer!"

"Bess, don't take it so to heart, for the secret is known to only you and I," he said.

"Do you speak the truth in saying that we were not married?" she asked in the same husky voice.

"Yes, Bess."

"Who was the padre that married us?"

"He was no padre, but a hireling of mine, I had come over from New Orleans for the purpose."

"You had other admirers, Bess, and I wished to bind you to me, so that when I got ready to claim you, I could do so."

"My father, I knew, would not give his consent to my marrying a fisherman's daughter, and I was in no condition, financially, to offend him, so I determined to wait until I had money."

"Now he is dead, and he has left me penniless, and I can not live in poverty, so I must find a rich New Orleans heiress to make my wife."

He spoke throughout like the cold, selfish man that he was, and she listened to him without the quiver of a muscle, or the movement of an eye, which were fixed upon him as though for the first time she read the villain in the man she had trusted.

He was somewhat unnerved at the manner in which she had received the fearful tidings he made known to her, for he liked not her look, and had always found her confiding and affectionate toward him.

Now he feared her.

"You have spoken the truth, have you, Mark Mortimer?" she asked.

"Yes, Bessie; but don't feel bad, as you can easily catch a husband, who need not know of our little love affair."

"Go!"

"What do you mean, Bess?" he asked, as she pointed to the door.

"Go! For the present our paths in life divide, Mark Mortimer, but they will come together again."

"Bessie, what do you mean?" he cried, awed by her imperious and cold manner.

"I mean that you shall leave this house now, before I am tempted to take your life."

He shrank from her, for he saw in her face that she would do all she said, and he answered as he turned away:

"If you ever need a friend, Bessie, command me."

"Good by."

He walked from the cabin, leaving her standing, white, cold and trembling now, gazing out into the darkness whither he had gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

WHEN Juan Gito sailed away from his little home, with Frank Forrester reclining indolently in the stern sheets, his brow wore a troubled look, and he did not gaze upon his companion with any feeling of regard for him, it was very evident.

"You look as black as a thunder-cloud, Gito," said Frank Forrester, in his indolent way, removing a fragrant cigar from between his teeth as he spoke.

"I feel like a thunder-cloud, Captain Forrester," was the low reply of the fisherman.

"Ah! you do not like this long night run up to the Black Lagoon, then?"

"For that I care nothing, sir," was the curt reply.

"Indeed! but you shall be well paid for it, good Juan."

"I ask no gold for such service for you, Forrester, but I do ask of you a favor."

"Name your request."

"You have met my daughter?"

"Thank God, yes! She has saved me from the yard-arm!" was the earnest reply.

"You feel grateful to her, then?"

"Of course, and she can command me for any service I can do her."

"Then keep away from her."

"What do you mean, man?"

"I mean what I say, senor," and Juan Gito spoke rapidly and in earnest.

"I mean that I know how you fascinate, toy with and destroy women whose love you win, and I beg you to never again cross the path of Bessie Gito."

"She is young, innocent, looks upon all men as honest—"

"Even her father," sneered Captain Forrester.

"Yes, for she knows not one act of my life that is sinful, nor shall she, for were any man to tell her what I am, I would drive my knife to his heart," and Juan Gito spoke almost savagely.

"No man, knowing you, Juan, would be so foolish as to tell her, unless he wanted to lose his life," was the calm reply.

"Well, she believes me and all whom she meets to be honest men, and I wish her to so continue to believe."

"She is attached to a young man now, who, though he is wild, is rich, has good blood in his veins, and will soon tone down, and I want to see her marry him."

"But I know you would win her from him if you could."

"You saved my life, Forrester, and I would give you gold for it, if you were poor, or I would risk my life to aid you, or save you trouble, but don't come between me and my daughter, or I will forget the past."

"My dear Juan, you are fretting yourself needlessly about nothing, for your daughter saved me from the yard-arm and I respect and admire her for her nerve and goodness."

"She is beautiful, refined, educated, a rose growing in a forest, and she is deserving of a good husband, so dismiss from your mind all thought that I have any designs upon her, for I have only lately become engaged to the fair lady of The Everglades, who, you may know, has most mysteriously disappeared within the past twenty-four hours."

The fisherman started, and asked quickly:

"Is she dead?"

"Some believe so, but I do not."

"A boat, with her hat in it, drifted ashore and was picked up near the villa, and it is thought that she was drowned, but I believe she has been kidnapped, and I want you to discover the truth for me."

"She had better be at the bottom of the Gulf than wedded to you, senor," bluntly said Juan Gito.

"It may be true, Juan: but then I intend to become a good man now, quit all cruising, and settle down, should the fair Mabel be alive; but what object is that in the water ahead?"

The fisherman headed directly for the object that had attracted the attention of Forrester, and leaning over the bows the latter seized it and dragged it into the boat.

One glance, and Juan Gito cried:

"Great God! it is Jean Jewett!"

"And who is Jean Jewett, Gito?" quietly asked Forrester, gazing down indifferently upon the body of a young man in sailor garb, and who had evidently been dead many hours.

The fisherman seemed moved deeply for an instant, from some cause, and again Forrester repeated:

"Who is Jean Jewett?"

"A young fisherman who lived up the coast."

"Ah! you knew him then?"

"Yes, well, for he was one of my daughter's lovers, though of course she cared little for him."

"I saw him two days ago, alive and well, and now I find him dead."

"Poor fellow, I will give him decent burial when I return, so please take the helm, captain, while I wrap him in this sail."

Forrester obeyed, and Juan Gito at once wrapped the body in an old piece of canvas and stowed it away forward, while he muttered:

"He accomplished the work he swore to do, and his death saves me breaking my word to him, and perhaps having to kill him, for never would I have given him Bessie for a wife, and the fool should have known it,"

"Now to get rid of the captain, and then all will be fair sailing to carry out my plan of having my child marry that young scamp, the master of The Everglades, who by the death of his sister will now become immensely rich."

Returning to his post at the helm, Juan Gito held his little craft on its way to the Black Lagoon, both he and his passenger for the rest of the voyage remaining as silent as the canvas-enwrapped form forward, though their thoughts were busy plotting for the future.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

LAKELANDS PLANTATION was the grandest of the many handsome homes along the shores of Mississippi Sound at the time of which I write, though The Everglades was almost a rival in every particular, for both were the abode of luxury, refinement, yet not of happiness.

In each home a skeleton was hidden in the closet, and shadows had hung over the hearts of the masters of the two elegant mansions, until at last the storm-cloud had broken, and death had followed.

Long ago Mark Mortimer, of The Everglades, and Percy Wyndham, of Lakelands, had been like brothers.

But a woman came between, and when the then Midshipman Percy Wyndham had been away at sea, Cadet Mark Mortimer had stolen from him the one being of his love and made her his wife.

Upon the return of the young sailor a duel had followed, and Mark Mortimer had fallen, severely wounded at the hands of the man he had wronged.

Going to Mexico, to recuperate from his severe wound, he had met, and pretended to marry—for his wife was then at The Everglades—a young Mexican maiden, and then deserted her by pretending to have been cast off the coast in a storm.

Resuming her maiden name, to inherit some property, the deserted bride, as she believed herself to be, afterward met and married Percy Wyndham, and, after long years, he brought her with their son, young Percy, to his long-deserted home of Lakelands.

There it was that Mrs. Wyndham, once Nina Valjos, the Mexican maiden, found how she had been wronged by Mark Mortimer, who still lived, dwelling within a mile of her, with his two children, Mark and Mabel, the former a reckless youth, most willing to follow in his father's footsteps, as the reader will know, remembering the scene between him and poor Bessie Gito, and the latter a beautiful young girl of most lovely character, who was like her mother.

Mrs. Wyndham was revengeful in her nature, and having kept her secret from her husband of her former marriage, had determined to avenge her wrongs herself, when at last the dread affair became known to Captain Wyndham through the visit of a Mexican attorney.

Having fought Mark Mortimer, the cadet, long before for a wrong done, Captain Wyndham determined to avenge his wife by demanding a meeting with Major Mark Mortimer, the retired army officer, and this Mrs. Wyndham determined to prevent.

To do so, she intercepted a letter to the master of The Everglades, sent her husband to New Orleans in his yacht to seek his foe, and wrote to Major Mortimer herself, demanding a meeting.

Little dreaming what he was wanted for, the elegant master of The Everglades went to the appointed rendezvous, Magnolia Arbor, where long before he had so nearly lost his life in his duel with Percy Wyndham, and he found there the woman he had so cruelly deceived in Mexico.

She was not alone, for Toby, an old and faithful slave, and his daughter Phoebe, a handsome mulattress, were with her.

Then and there did Mrs. Wyndham demand that Major Mark Mortimer should meet her in the duel, and not her husband and son, and the man was forced to consent, and the two faced each other.

But Phoebe, to save her master, had given Mark Mortimer an unloaded weapon, and he had fallen dead under the fire of the woman, who, upon discovering what the mulattress had done, falnted away, just as her son Percy came up.

A word from old Toby told him all, just as two neighboring planters rode up, and to shield his mother the noble boy said that he

had slain the dead man in a duel, and that Mrs. Wyndham had fainted upon arriving upon the scene, and finding what he had done.

Back to her elegant home was Mrs. Wyndham borne by her faithful servants, it was said a raving maniac, and to The Everglades went the news of its master's death; and a faithful negro sought to avenge him, and also fell at the hands of Percy Wyndham, whom he had attacked, and was carried back to the plantation, it was feared, mortally wounded.

And to the village jail went Percy Wyndham, to be tried for fighting a duel without seconds, which was akin to murder; but no proof of wrong-doing being brought against him, he returned to Lakelands to find his mother indeed mad, and to receive the body of his father, who had fallen at the hand of young Mark Mortimer, who thus had avenged his father's death.

Thus had the shadows gathered around the homes of the Wyndhams and the Mortimers, and though soon after Major Mortimer and Captain Wyndham had been laid in their graves, Percy Wyndham, the youthful heir to Lakelands had saved Mabel Mortimer from being kidnapped by ruffians, it had not brought peace between the two names, though the forgiving maiden, at the grave of her father, had forgiven the man who it was believed had laid him in that grave, and so nobly served her.

Among his fast associates in New Orleans, Percy Wyndham claimed as his bosom friend Frank Forrester, said to be a wealthy yachtsman, and the owner of a craft known as the Jack-o'-lantern, which, before he had purchased her, had been a noted smuggling vessel along the coast.

This man, Forrester, had seconded young Percy in his duel with Captain Wyndham, and returning to The Everglades with him as a guest, had become engaged to the fair Mabel, who, loving no one, had been urged to marry the rich, handsome, and fascinating yachtsman, by her brother, but little dreaming, innocent girl that she was, that that brother had sold her for a gambling debt he owed to the one he had determined she should marry.

Such were the scenes and incidents that had happened prior to the opening of this romance, and from what has been told the reader will understand that Bessie Gito was not the only maiden against whom a plot had been formed by evil men, and whether the mysterious disappearance of Mabel Mortimer had been the result of the plot the sequel will show.

CHAPTER X.

THE MANIAC.

In the wing of the mansion known as Lakelands, upon the night of the scene between Percy Wyndham and Bessie Gito in Cliff Cabin, as the fisherman's home was called, sat a lady in one of two rooms that adjoined.

One of the rooms was a sleeping chamber, the other a sitting-room, and they were furnished with taste and luxury, for every comfort of that age seemed to adorn them.

The lady seemed to be the only occupant, and sat in an easy-chair, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, and her expression that of deep and painful thought.

She was dressed in a wrapper of canary-colored silk, trimmed with Spanish lace, and it was most becoming to her dark style of beauty, for she was beautiful, though two-score years had passed over her head.

Her hands, small and shapely, glittered with precious stones, gems were in her ears, and a massive necklace of gold was about her neck; but for her ornaments and dress she seemed to have no thought, and rising impatiently she approached one of the windows, and drew back the heavy curtains.

On the outer side, the drawing back of the curtain revealed heavy bars, like those that shut in a jail window, and as the eyes of the woman fell upon them she seemed to shrink back, while over her face passed an expression of deep pain.

"Oh, God! am I indeed the mad being they tell me I am?" she groaned, and leaning against the window she buried her face in her hands, unmindful of the view of flower-garden, evergreen hedges, lawn and rolling gulf beyond, that was spread before her.

"Mad, they say I am, and yet I remember, or seem to remember, that all was not as they say it is.

"That man wronged me by a false marriage, now many, many years ago, and then pretended that he had been lost in a storm at sea.

"I took my maiden name, hid the secret of my marriage, and kept that dread secret too, even from poor Percy, whom I married.

"And at last, when I had a loving husband, and noble, handsome son, and was all so happy, the dread secret came out, and I sent my husband away that I might kill Major Mark Mortimer, and thus gain revenge for the wrong done me and mine.

"So it seems to me; but they tell me now that my son, my darling Percy, killed Major Mortimer, and that, although I tried to shield my husband from danger, he fell at the hands of the man whom they say Percy killed, but whom I believe I killed, or all is a bitter dream to me."

She gently caressed her brow for an instant, as though striving to collect her thoughts, and then said, eagerly:

"I must know how all this is, so shall ask Nance again."

She touched a silver bell, that stood on a table, and a key turned in the lock of a door in the outer room, and a young and pretty mulattress entered.

"Phoebe, where is your mother?"

"She is over at the quarter, mistis, just now," answered the negress, and she added:

"Can I do anything for mistis?"

"Yes, I was thinking about Major Mark Mortimer, and how he was killed."

"Don't think of that mistis," said Phoebe, who had been with her father, old Uncle Toby, the companion of her mistress upon that eventful occasion, and in fact the one who had so cleverly given Major Mortimer an unloaded weapon, determined that he should not wound or kill her mistress.

"But I must talk of it, Phoebe.

"We went to the Magnolia Arbor together, you, your father, and myself?"

"Yes, mistis."

"And I sent Uncle Toby to bring Major Mortimer there to meet me?"

"No, mistis," replied Phoebe firmly, having been taught her lesson well by the dutiful son, Percy, who was determined that the duel should rest upon him, and not on his mother, to drag her down in the public eye:

"No, mistis, we were walking with you in the forest, and came upon Marse Percy and Major Mortimer just as they fired, and you ran forward and fell near the major, whom Marse Percy had shot, and fainted away.

"When you came to, mistis, you said you had kilt the major, and then the doctor said you were mad."

She listened breathlessly to the words of the mulattress, her eyes growing brighter and brighter, and then said sadly:

"Phoebe, then I am mad?"

"Yes, mistis, you are crazy about that one subject, but all right about other things."

"Then why does my son Percy keep me here in prison, Phoebe?"

"He'll let you out soon, mistis, will Marse Percy, for he only wants you to stay here until you get well."

"I wish to go out, Phoebe, and visit the grave of my poor husband, and suddenly she added in ringing tones:

"And, mad though I be, avenge his death by killing Mark Mortimer, the son of the man I had hoped to slay, and whom you tell me my son killed."

"Yes, yes, that young murderer of my noble husband shall yet die by my hand."

She began to pace the room in a frenzy, and Phoebe, watching her chance, crept out, looking the door behind her.

But almost instantly her absence was noticed and again the bell was rung.

"Well, mistis?" and the mulattress reappeared.

"Bid your father come to me!" she commanded in an imperious tone, and the girl departed to obey, and soon after returned, accompanied by an old negro with a noble, resolute face: and evidently the factotum of the Lakelands plantation.

CHAPTER XI.

UNCLE TOBY.

"UNCLE TOBY" of Lakelands was one of those old negroes of slavery days, whose "calling" seems now to have passed away forever.

Then his master's house was his home, and he was respected upon the place only second to the planter and his wife, while he held full power in minor matters in which he was supreme.

Uncle Toby had been the "body-guardian" of Captain Wyndham in his boyhood, and had been his confidential servant on board ship, until he began to take care of the young Percy.

His wife, "Auntie Nance," had been a faithful servitor for the captain's mother, and in the long years of absence of her young master at sea, had been in charge of the plantation as it were.

When the captain, his wife and the young Percy returned to Lakelands, Auntie Nance became the faithful housekeeper to her new mistress, while Phoebe, her daughter, was installed as maid.

Uncle Toby had witnessed the duel, long years before, between Major Mortimer and his master, had been selected by his mistress to bring the major to the Magnolia Arbor, when he met his death, and in fact knew all the secrets of the family.

It was then for Uncle Toby that Mrs. Wyndham had sent Phoebe, for, in the absence of his young master, he held full charge.

A noble-faced, dignified old man, with hair that was whitening with age, Uncle Toby presented himself before his mistress.

Phoebe had warned him that she was excited, and he saw that she had spoken the truth, for Mrs. Wyndham was pacing to and fro like a tigress, her eyes flashing and bosom heaving.

"Toby, I would know of you why I am confined here like a criminal in a prison?" she said almost savagely.

"It is because you are ill, mistis, and master commanded it, fearing you might do yourself some harm," answered the old negro.

"Ill! look at me and you will see that I am in perfect health of body."

"Yes, mistis, but the trouble is in your head!"

"Ah! I am mad they say," she sneered.

"No, mistis, only you have had deep afflictions that have burst your heart and heated your brain, and master says that a little rest will bring you round all right."

"Once again, Uncle Toby, I ask you, did I not kill Major Mortimer?"

"You kill him, mistis?" asked the negro with well feigned surprise.

"Yes." "Why, mistis, don't you remember when you saw him dead how you fainted?"

"And my son Percy killed him, Toby?"

"Yes, mistis," and old Toby choked under the lie he felt it his duty to tell.

"Then I am indeed mad," she moaned, and it cut the negro to the heart to witness her sorrow and despair.

As Toby turned to depart she called out to him:

"Toby, where is your master?"

"He is absent, mistis."

"But where has he gone?"

"To New Orleans, mistis."

"What?" and she seemed alarmed.

"Yes, mistis, he went to the city."

"Alone?"

"Yes, mistis."

"And Mark Mortimer?"

"Is at The Everglades, m'am."

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes, mistis, for he has company there, and they do say his sister has been drowned, for she went out in a boat, and though they found it, and her hat early this morning, she was nowhere visible."

"Poor child, for they do say she has a lovely character, in spite of her father's sins," said Mrs. Wyndham sadly.

"Yes, mistis, she is a lovely young lady, and the folks at The Everglades love her from the youngest pickaninny, to the oldest of the lot."

"It is a pity that she has met such a fate, and that her brother will now be the heir of all the estate, for he is unworthy of it."

"But death shall strike him too, and then the name of Mortimer shall be wiped out of the land," she said with significant and savage earnestness, and after a moment of silence she asked:

"Uncle Toby, are you sure that Percy has not gone to the city to fight a duel with Mr. Mortimer?"

"Yes, mistis, I am sure."

She sighed and turned away, but almost instantly asked:

"How did he go?"

"By water, mistis."

"In his yacht?"

Uncle Toby looked troubled, for he knew

that Frank Forrester's yacht, the Jack-o'-lantern had sailed for New Orleans on special service for its master, and that Percy Wyndham had gone on board in disguise and thus went with her.

To tell this to his mother he knew would cause her great alarm, and so he answered:

"No, mistis, he sailed in the yacht of a young friend that touched here on a cruise."

The woman smiled, for when she had asked the question she had her eyes upon every yacht belonging to Lakelands, then lying quietly at anchor in the little basin, so that Uncle Toby, with no thought of this, had cleared himself well by his prevarication.

But he was no adept at deception, and was most delighted to escape the ordeal which he had been put through, by retiring from the rooms of the unfortunate woman.

CHAPTER XII.

ON BOARD THE JACK-O'-LANTERN.

It was a dark and blustering night, and the lake, some four miles back of the city of New Orleans, was lashed with foam, and the waves caused a graceful sloop yacht to tug impatiently at her anchors, as though anxious to fly away over the wind-swept waters.

The craft was a trim one from truck to keel, and had every indication of speed and stanch sea-going qualities.

Her decks were in perfect order, every rope coiled, the sails closely furled, and but two persons were visible upon her decks, and they stood near the stern, glancing out toward the land talking earnestly together.

The yacht carried two small guns amidships, a nine-pounder forward and one of like caliber aft, but they seemed really more for ornament and salutes than for use, for what need had a craft of so small a size for an armament against a foe.

Upon the sharp bowsprit of the vessel was fixed a lantern that gave forth a weird and mysterious light, which fell upon the deck and also illuminated the waters ahead.

It was a ghastly glow rather than a light, and issuing over the waters at night had the appearance of a will-o'-the-wisp, or jack-o'-lantern.

One of the doors of the companionway was partially open, and within a bright light was visible, shed from the swinging lamp.

At the table beneath this lamp sat a young girl dressed in pure white, though her dress had a ruffled look, as though it had been wet.

Her face was one of exquisite beauty, each feature being marked with an expression of sweetness of temper, yet resolution of character, and her complexion as pure as a lily, yet bronzed by the balmy south wind.

She had about her shoulders a Spanish scarf, and her hair was in braids and hung to the floor as she sat at the table, engaged in reading.

Presently a hail on deck caused her to start, and then followed the sound of footsteps above her head, and a moment after a person descended into the cabin.

"Pardon me, Miss Mortimer," he said, "for detaining you so long from your friends, but I was unable to get a crew sooner."

He was a youth of striking appearance in form and feature.

Tall, slender, yet well knit, his form denoted strength and agility, and his motions were quick and decided.

His face would have been called beautiful for a woman even, and yet there hovered about the mouth and far back in the large, sad-looking eyes, the look of thorough manhood, a resolute will and daring nature.

He wore a sailor cap upon his brown curls and was attired in a suit of dark blue that was most becoming to him.

He looked scarcely eighteen, yet was older, and when his face was in repose one might have believed him all of twenty-four, for then there rested upon it the thoughtful look of the student.

In answer to his remark, Mabel Mortimer, for she it was, said with a smile:

"I am too thankful, Mr. Wyndham, that you have saved me from drowning, to quarrel with the delay at returning to my home, for I know you will take me there as soon as it is in your power."

"Assuredly will I do so, Miss Mortimer; and now, as I have let you into my secret in

coming here, I will tell you that the boatswain, Lomax, concluded that he would rather betray his pirate comrades than lose his life at the yard-arm, so guided Captain Norton, the commandant of the City Guard, and myself to the rendezvous where he intended to get the crew to reinforce this Skimmer of the Sea, and they fell into our hands without difficulty."

"I am glad of that, for I feared the man might betray you," answered Mabel Mortimer.

"I gave him no opportunity to do so, though he endeavored to get me to follow his advice and thus lead me into a trap.

"Having imprisoned this band of pirates, for they are little more, Captain Norton and half a hundred of his men, disguised as seamen, have come on board with me, and we sail at once for the Black Lagoon, or will first land you at The Everglades, if you so wish."

"You feel assured then, Mr. Wyndham, that this Captain Forrester, whom my brother urges that I should marry, is sailing under false colors?" asked the maiden.

"I do."

"You even suspect that he commands the vessel now lying in the Black Lagoon?"

"Yes, Miss Mortimer."

"Well, sir, I will accompany you to the Black Lagoon, and see for myself if your suspicions are correct; that is, if I do not incommod you by my presence," she said, with a smile.

"Not in the least, I assure you, for the yacht will readily accommodate those on board for the short run, so make yourself as thoroughly at home here as you can," and Percy Wyndham turned to leave the cabin, when Mabel called him back.

"Mr. Wyndham," she began, in an embarrassed way, "pardon me if I speak plainly under the circumstances, but interest in one other prompts me to do so."

Percy Wyndham bowed, but made no reply, and Mabel continued:

"Of the wrong my father did yours long years ago, and which I now know, through correspondence he left at his death, I will not speak, nor will I ask you just why you demanded a meeting with my poor father and killed him, for his death at your hands was canceled by the act of my misguided brother in slaying your father, and you, having twice saved my life, put the debt largely upon the Mortimers to you."

"But I must ask you to do me a favor."

"Name it, Miss Mortimer," answered Percy, quietly.

"First, do you think my brother Mark knows who Frank Forrester really is?"

"Frankly, I do not."

"They were most intimate friends, as you know."

"True, but other than knowing that Forrester is a gambler, and fast man about the city, I believe your brother is ignorant of all other knowledge regarding him."

"I am rejoiced to hear you speak thus, Mr. Wyndham, for I feared in my own heart that when, as you assert, Captain Forrester has played so bold a game successfully, my poor brother might also be sailing under the same colors and be found on board the vessel you are going to the Black Lagoon to capture."

"No, Miss Mortimer, your brother I look upon as an honorable man, although he is my foe, and he has been—pardon me for so saying—merely a tool in the hands of Forrester."

"I disliked Mr. Forrester at our first meeting, and watching him closely, I felt that there was some mystery about him, other than that he was a man of wealth, a successful gambler, and the owner of the Jack-o'-lantern yacht."

"Circumstances aiding me, I was enabled to come on board this vessel in disguise, which you see I have removed, and by so doing I have confirmed my suspicions regarding Captain Forrester, and very soon you will know whether I am right or wrong."

"That I followed the course I did, I am more than glad, for by it I was able to pick you up that night at sea and save your life, as your little boat could never have lived through the blow that followed."

"No, I owe you my life a second time, and you are surely most good to me, when between your name and mine there is a cruel vendetta."

"But I detain you," and Mabel turned away to hide her emotion, while Percy Wyndham went on deck, and five minutes after the Jack-o'-lantern was standing out into deep water, bound on her way to the Black Lagoon.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHASED BY A BUCCANEER.

WHEN Percy Wyndham went on deck, he found full half a hundred seamen assembled, and a boat just coming aboard with another load.

A tall, fine-looking man in sailor garb, stood aft, and seeing him, said:

"Well, Mr. Wyndham, here comes the last boat-load, and we will be all ready for you."

The speaker was Captain Norton, the chief of the City Guard, whom Percy Wyndham had let into the secret with him, and obtained his aid in the intended capture of a vessel in the Black Lagoon, said to be the famous Skeleton Schooner, commanded by the Skimmer of the Sea, a buccaneer who had spread terror on the Gulf by his bold piracies.

When the yacht, Jack-o'-lantern, had been anchored off The Everglades plantation, and her elegant master, Frank Forrester, was a guest of Mark Mortimer, who had sold his sister to him for a gambling debt he owed the yachtsman, Percy Wyndham had been trying to solve the mystery connected with the strange man, and finding out sufficient to cause him to play a bold part, he had daringly gone on board the little vessel in disguise, and sailed in her to New Orleans on a mission to bring back a picked crew for the mysterious armed vessel then undergoing repairs in the Black Lagoon.

Upon his way out from the harborage of The Everglades, he had picked up a boat adrift, and in it Mabel Mortimer, securely bound, and the daughter of the man he had taken upon himself the claim of having killed in the duel at Magnolia Arbor.

Percy Wyndham, in his disguise, was not known to Mabel Mortimer but soon he told her just who he was and that his mission to New Orleans was to track down the man, Frank Forrester, whom she had consented, urged by her brother, to marry.

She had not loved the man, though she found him a pleasant companion, and she readily assented to continue on in the yacht, rather than thwart the plot of her preserver by having him return with her to The Everglades, as he had offered to do.

Having successfully, with the aid of the yacht's boatswain, accomplished his purpose of capturing the crew, the man had been sent after for the mysterious vessel in the Black Lagoon, I will now follow the fortunes of the Jack-o'-lantern in her daring undertaking.

Hardly had a good offing into the lake been gained, when a light was sighted off the starboard quarter, which Percy Wyndham's night-glass soon discovered to be a vessel under reefed sails heading toward them.

"It is a schooner, Lomax; do you know her?" asked Percy, of a burly man at his side, and the same who had proved traitor to his comrades to save his own neck.

The man took the glass and gave a long look through it, muttering to himself the while.

So long did he continue the observation that Captain Norton said:

"Well, Lomax, you'll be able to tell us all about her, I guess."

Lomax made no reply, but continued his gaze, until Wyndham said sternly:

"Come, my man, do you know that craft?"

"I was just tryin' to find out," was the sullen reply.

"You have seen her before?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is she an American vessel of war?"

"Do you think she is armed, sir?"

"I know she is, for I saw that in the glance I took at her; and where are your eyes that you did not discover it?"

"Yes, sir, she is armed, and I think an American."

"Well, I think not, for I know every American craft of her caliber in these waters, and she is rigged far different from any of them."

"Let the Lantern fall off half a dozen points, helmsman, and here, lads, shake those reefs out of the sails, for I'll run from yonder craft until I know just what she is."

The orders were obeyed by the guards in their seamen's dress, for most of them had been picked for their knowledge of the sea, and the yacht at once darted away over the rough waters with increased speed.

Instantly the course of the stranger was changed, and at once it was evident that it was to be a chase, while Lomax, who had been attentively regarding the other vessel, muttered:

"Curses on the luck! I hoped to have

caught them that time, but that youth is too cunning."

"Now I must see if I cannot redeem myself, for I verily believe he suspects my little game," and turning he called out quickly:

"Captain Wyndham!"

"Ay, ay, what is it?" and Percy Wyndham turned toward the man.

"I have got my bearings on that craft, I think, sir."

"Well?"

"She is one of two vessels, for there are but two hulls of her size in these waters that carry the tall sticks she's got and can spread the canvas she does."

"What vessels are those two?"

"One is the craft known as the Red Rover."

"Ha! commanded by Basil, the Buccaneer!" exclaimed Captain Norton, who had heard his words.

"Yes, sir."

"I know much of that sea rascal, for he first began as a coast smuggler, was caught, sentenced to be hanged, and escaped, to reappear as a pirate in this Red Rover, which is said to be as fleet as is the Skeleton Schooner," said Captain Norton.

"And she is, sir, for we have had runs together," boldly answered the man, while Percy Wyndham asked:

"What is the other vessel you referred to, Lomax?"

"The Skeleton Schooner, sir."

"But you know that you left her at the Black Lagoon, repairing damages after her fight with that American cruiser, so how could it be the schooner?"

"Well, sir, our captain, or that is the one who was my captain, is a strange man, and he may have run on here in the schooner, intending to get his own crew."

"And the vessels are so much alike that you fail to recognize whether that is the Red Rover or the Skeleton Schooner?"

"At night, sir, they are strangely alike, for I cannot see the red hull of the Rover, and if it is the Skeleton Schooner, she hasn't got her skulls lighted up."

"Well, whichever it is, we will be safe in running from her," said Percy.

"If it is either vessel, sir, fast as is the Lantern, she can overhaul you," said Lomax.

"If she can, she is welcome to do so; but I will lead her to ruin if she follows me, unless she has a pilot on board that can run a channel I intend to take," was Percy Wyndham's reply, and he stepped to the wheel and grasped it, just as the bows of the strange vessel were illuminated by a flash, and with the roar of a gun came a solid shot over the decks of the Jack-o'-lantern.

"See the red hull," cried Captain Norton, as the flash revealed it.

"Yes, it is the red cutter," answered Lomax.

"I feel that you knew that when you first glanced at her, so beware, sir, that I have no more reason to doubt you," sternly said Percy Wyndham, and Lomax slunk away, just as Mabel Mortimer came on deck, alarmed by the firing.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DEATH CANAL

NOTWITHSTANDING the shaking out of the reefs in the Jack-o'-lantern's sails, and the yacht being a wonderfully fast sailer, the Red Rover continued to gain upon her.

The sea was very rough, and though a stanch craft, the Jack-o'-lantern was too small, and not deep enough in the hull, to enable her to stand the rude shock of the waves, and on a quartering sea, as Percy Wyndham had to keep her to hold her toward the point for which he was steering.

With a twelve-knot breeze, and in ordinarily rough water, the Jack-o'-lantern had shown a clean pair of heels to the fastest of vessels, but now she had one in her wake, which Lomax, the traitor, a reformed pirate, as the case might be with him, asserted was equal in speed to the notorious vessel known as the Skeleton Schooner, and sailed by a man whose escapes had won him the name of Skimmer of the Sea.

To all on board the yacht, excepting Percy Wyndham, it was a chaotic picture, for wild waters were upon every side, the decks were drenched by the waves, ahead all was darkness, above were inky clouds, and astern came the grim pursuer, her red hull lighted up ever and anon by the flash of her bow guns.

Percy Wyndham had been a sailor since his infancy almost, for he was wont to climb to the mast-head of his father's vessel when but five years of age, and taught by all, from the captain to the cabin boy, he had become thoroughly acquainted with every duty on board ship.

His whole boyhood life, in fact, had been passed on shipboard, and in cruising about the Gulf, pirate-hunting with his father, he had learned the in-shore waters well, and, upon going to Lakelands to dwell, in his own yacht, and a negro crew, he had spent days cruising along the coast, until the shoals and channels were as familiar to him as were the walks about the mansion grounds at home.

Knowing now that the Red Rover would ruin his plot, for he would side with his brother pirate, Percy Wyndham was most anxious to prevent the capture of the yacht.

It would give Lomax a chance to crow over him, put in durance vile Captain Norton and his sailor guard, and worse still, place Mabel Mortimer in the power of a pirate known for his cruelty to all.

He was therefore most determined in his intention to wreck the yacht even before she should fall into the hands of the Red Rover.

"Captain, I have heard that these were deadly waters to sail in," said Lomax, approaching the wheel and joining Percy.

"You have heard right, sir, they are deadly waters, but astern comes a greater danger to all, except such men as you are," was the grim reply of Percy, whose eyes were piercing the darkness ahead.

In the cockpit was Mabel Mortimer, and near her stood Captain Norton, whom the young sailor had presented to her, while amidships crouched and clung the crew, all impressed with the gravity of their situation.

Behind Percy stood two seamen, he had called there to aid him if necessary, while he alone held the wheel, and put it to starboard, or port, as the case demanded, with a strength that surprised all, and an ease that made it appear like ordinary work.

The firing of the Red Rover was steady, but her shots flew wild, though she still kept up the chase, doubtless believing the yacht to be a pleasure craft with a party out of the city, whose jewels and gold would repay the capture of it.

"Have you heard of the Death Canal hereabout, captain?" asked Lomax, returning to the charge again, and addressing Percy as captain.

"Yes."

"It can't be far away, sir."

"No, not a league."

"There is wild water thereabout, sir."

"Yes, but there is a wilder bottom under a keel," was the grim reply.

"They say that not a dozen pilots on the coast can run the Death Canal by day, sir," continued Lomax.

"I know of one who intends to run it by night."

"Who is he, may I ask, sir?"

"Myself."

The reply startled the man, and seeing it, Mabel asked:

"Mr. Wyndham, what is the Death Canal, for I have often heard of it?"

"A channel-way between shoals, Miss Mortimer, which the action of the waters changes several times a year, and which, if I run in safety, will put us into the sound through the islands, where the Red Rover dare not attempt to follow us, unless he has a pilot that will take the chances in this blow and darkness," answered Percy Wyndham.

"And you intend to risk it, Wyndham?" asked Captain Norton.

"I do."

The captain glanced out over the wild waters, then at the pursuer astern, and after letting his eye run over the yacht, and noticing her behavior, he said:

"The chances must be fearful such a night as this, Wyndham."

"They are, but I will take them, for I have run through once before in a storm, and many times in rough weather by day, and even if we go down, it is a better fate than our capture by yonder craft will bring upon us."

"But I can see nothing to guide you, Mr. Wyndham," said Mabel, who had risen, and glanced steadily out over the wild scene.

"I can tell the moment I sound the first shoal, Miss Mortimer, by the difference in the waters, and then I shall run through by sounding."

The Gambler Pirate.

"Forward, there! two of you get lead-lines, and stand ready starboard and port to throw them," he called out, in ringing tones, and soon from the bows came the reply:

"All ready, sir."

Just as they spoke there came a shot from the Red Rover, and the topmast was struck and shivered to atoms by the iron ball, some of the pieces dropping upon the deck.

But the hand that held the wheel never wavered, and on the Jack-o'-lantern flew like the wind, held steadily on her course, into greater dangers than those that surrounded her.

CHAPTER XV.

FOILED.

On through the darkness, unhurt by the fire of the Red Rover, save the splintering of her topmast, rushed the Jack-o'-lantern, all eagerly watching the pursuing buccaneer, the young and fearless pilot, and then peering out into the darkness to try and discover what danger was ahead.

Calm, wholly indifferent to the deadly dangers surrounding him, and the fact that all rested upon him, Percy Wyndham stood at his post, his hands firmly grasping the wheel, and his eyes seeming to pierce the blackness.

The Red Rover had crept much nearer, and was coming on at a hot pace, seemingly determined to run the Jack-o'-lantern down, or wreck her, for her commander must know of the Death Canal ahead.

Her two bow guns were now firing, to disable, if possible, the craft before she could reach the shoals, and only the roughness of the waters prevented her aim being true, for the gunners on that pirate deck had had long practice in just such scenes.

Suddenly the yacht seemed rather to glide than bound along as before, and instantly Percy Wyndham's voice cried:

"Forward, there!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Cast!"

"Ay, ay, sir;" and the two men threw their leads, and one instantly called out, in a drawling tone:

"Five fathoms!"

Then followed the other with:

"Four fathoms!"

Instantly Percy Wyndham put his wheel half round, and the course of the vessel was changed, and again came the cry:

"Five and a half fathoms!"

"Six fathoms!"

"Good!" cried Percy, and he kept his vessel's bow pointed toward the deeper water, until again came from forward, the starboard leadsmen shouting:

"Seven fathoms!"

"Six and a half fathoms!" came from the starboard leadsmen, and luffing a little, Percy Wyndham held the yacht steady, with the quiet remark:

"We have hit it right, and are now in the Death Canal."

Not a word was said in reply, and every eye afloat was turned upon the daring young helmsman, watching him with breathless interest, while from forward, in obedience to his orders, the leadsmen sung out continually the depth, and the wheel was moved from starboard to port, or *vice versa*, as was deemed right.

The sea was now far less wild, for the line of shoals broke the waves from the Gulf, as the wind and wash came from that direction, and those who had good eyes could see to seaward a wall of foam, to which they ran almost parallel, while to leeward now and then a lesser line of white became visible from time to time.

Occupied with the dangers of their position, all seemed to forget almost their pursuer, until they saw Percy Wyndham quickly glance astern.

There, still in pursuit, came the Red Rover; but, as though he knew that she must go about, or continue to stand on within the minute, Percy kept his eyes turned over his shoulder, steering wholly by the voices of his leadsmen.

Suddenly there broke from his lips, in ringing tones:

"Foiled! the Red Rover dare not follow us through the Death Canal!"

At his words Mabel Mortimer sprung to her feet and gazed astern, as did all others, while from half a hundred lips broke a ringing cheer.

There, just before gaining the entrance to the Death Canal, the Red Rover was seen going about, to beat again out into the Gulf.

But, as she wore round, as though angry at

being foiled, and at not daring to follow, she sent a broadside after the little vessel.

Well aimed, several shots tore along the decks, through the hull, and cut holes in the large sail, but, worst of all, left several men dead and wounded in their wake.

But not a muscle of Percy Wyndham's hands quivered as he held his vessel on her course, while he cried, when excited voices were heard forward:

"Silence! for I must hear every word of the leadsmen!"

The voices ceased, only a moan of pain being heard, and on flew the Jack-o'-lantern through the Death Canal to safety in the waters beyond the shoals.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE BLACK LAGOON.

A SMALL surf-skiff, under a leg-of-mutton sail was dancing along over the dark waters of what is now Mississippi Sound, and about a league off-shore.

The skiff was the same craft that had gone out to the yacht, wrecked upon the Shark's Back reef, and the occupant, for it held but one person, was a woman, or rather a young girl, and none other than Bessie Gito, the Lady of the Lagoon.

She had paced the floor of the little sitting-room of the cabin for a long time, after the departure of Mark Mortimer, brooding bitterly over his cruel confession to her, and with a heart full of sorrow and bitterness, which found no relief in tears for they refused to flow.

Since the day that Mark Mortimer had saved her from a fearful death, she had loved him with all the intensity of her Spanish nature.

Men said he was wild, dissipated, haughty, but she saw only his virtues, and her mind conjured up for him goodness he did not possess.

Often he was wont to meet her, when she was sailing along the shores in her surf-skiff, and hours the lovers, for such they seemed, passed together.

That the young planter was infatuated by the beautiful girl there was no doubt, and his intention was to make her his wife.

But his financial affairs worried him constantly, for he owed large gambling debts, had run through the most of his inheritance, and he knew his father would not help him out of many more scrapes in the future, as he had in the past.

He feared that he might lose the fair maid of Cliff Cottage, and to bind her to him urged that she should secretly become his wife.

In an evil moment she yielded to his request, and one day in New Orleans, whither she had gone with her father in his sloop, she met the young scapegrace, and was, as she believed, married to him by a priest.

But Mark Mortimer had prepared himself against contingencies, should his love for her change, and he not win a fortune with cards, by making it a mock marriage.

True to his instinct of villainy, when, by his father's death, he found he was penniless, and that his sister Mabel got The Everglades and fortune as her inheritance, he had traded that sister's hand to a gambler, as he knew Frank Forrester to be, as the settlement of a gambling debt, and for so much cash over in hand.

Having done this, and dreading longer to depend upon the fickle Goddess of Fortune, he formed in his wicked mind a hideous plot to enrich himself, and which precious bit of villainy will ere long be revealed to the reader.

He also had decided that he would marry one of the rich maidens of New Orleans, whose fortune would make him a man of wealth.

To do this he must rid himself of Bessie Gito, and so he visited her, and made known the cruel deception he had practiced upon her, feeling well assured that she would keep to herself the secret of his treachery.

The reader has seen how she received the dread tidings, and some time after he left, while she paced the floor, some plan of action seemed to flash into her mind, and at once she dressed herself in a boating suit, threw what necessaries she wished to take along with her into a box, and locking the cabin, walked rapidly down to the shore.

Her surf-skiff was soon ready, under her quick and skillful hands, and away stood the little craft, heading along the coast, and following it about a league off shore, under the

pressure of a breeze that sent her skimming along swiftly over the waters.

Thus she sailed along through the darkness, sending eight knots an hour astern of her, and seemingly as much at home by night, and at the tiller of her craft, as at home in her little cabin.

"There opens the Black Lagoon, as well as I can judge," she muttered, peering earnestly landward.

Then letting off her little sail, she squared away dead before the wind, and went flying straight for the dark, forest-grown shores.

Here and there a tall pine reared its foliage far above the dark line that marked the tops of the other trees, and this seemed to be the maiden's only guide to reach the mouth of the lagoon.

As she drew nearer the shores were dark, dismal, and impenetrable, and the waters seemed to have lost their spray, and appeared to be as black as ink.

All around her was still and somber, with only the wash of the waves upon the shore, and the occasional hoot of an owl to wake the awful silence.

In spite of her nerve Bessie Gito shuddered, and said to herself:

"This place is well named, for indeed it is a Black Lagoon."

On into what seemed the very forest her surf-skiff glided, looking most ghostly in its white hull, relieved against the blackness of water and land, and then before her opened the huge arms of land, and she was floating into the mouth, and upon the inky waters of the lagoon.

As the wind blew directly up the lagoon, her surf skiff held on its way, while on either side the heavy drapery of Spanish moss hung in many long festoons around her, and trailed in the water like funereal garments.

At last, as she rounded a bend, the wind no longer filled her sail, and furling it against the mast, she took up her oars and started to row, when a light far ahead suddenly caught her eyes.

"It is from a cabin on shore, or a vessel; perhaps the vessel," she muttered, and taking the bearings of the light, she rowed with an almost silent but strong stroke up the lagoon.

For half a mile she went on, and glancing over her shoulder and seeing from whence came the light she headed for it.

In under the festoons of moss her skiff glided and then she shipped her oars and turned to utter a wild cry of terror.

And no wonder that she did so, and sunk down upon her knees with the ringing prayer:

"Mary Mother save me, or I am forever lost!"

There, within a few feet of her, dimly visible, black hull, raking masts, tapering spars, furled sails and all, over which the foliage and moss hung like a vail, was a large schooner lying against the bank.

But, worst of all, and far more terrible, the figure-head of the strange vessel was a skeleton form.

One bony arm was extended, the skeleton fingers grasping a cutlass, and the light she had seen, and believed shone from a cabin window, or vessel, came from out the sightless sockets of the skull, emitting a weird, ghastly glow that seemed to look down into her inmost heart, and illumined the hideous form, and grinning teeth with a smile that was fearful and diabolical.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS VESSEL.

The shadowy looking vessel, with the weird and ghastly light, which Bessie Gito had come upon hiding away in the moss-hung foliage of the lagoon bank, was a large schooner, whose saucy rig under the circumstances would have won for her admiration and suspicion.

Some half a hundred and more years ago, a vessel with a "long, low black hull," and "raking masts," was the typical craft for free rovers, and all honest ships gave such a wide berth whether meeting them along the coast or far out in mid-ocean.

Such a one was the vessel hidden in the lagoon, and looking like a huge black ghost shrinking from sight.

Her hull was deep in the water, gaunt as a hound, amidships, and her masts were very tall and raked in a most saucy manner.

Then her decks were armed with four eighteens to a broadside, and three pivots mounted forward, aft and in the waist, and on

a line with the masts, which gave an additional weight of three pieces of heavier ordnance to a broadside.

It was a heavy armament for a craft of her tonnage, which was about two hundred and sixty tons, and the pivot guns were thirty-twos, showing that she could make a good fight in offense or defense, if she had a good crew.

It was long after midnight, when Bessie came so suddenly upon the vessel, and but one person was visible upon her deck, and he was pacing to and fro in the waist, more as a form than on watch, for what need of watch was there in that lonely, desolate spot?

A glimmer of light was visible in the sky-light of the cabin, and beneath the swing-lamp from which it came were two persons.

One of these was Frank Forrester, the other Juan Gito, the Fisherman of Cliff Cottage.

They had arrived on board the schooner about midnight, and, after a substantial supper, had begun an earnest conversation which had lasted into the small hours.

Before them were numerous papers and a book of accounts, it seemed, for Captain Forrester frequently referred to it to settle some mooted question.

The cabin was furnished with a luxury that showed her commander to be one who loved his ease, and a perfect profusion of articles of value were scattered here and there.

"Well, Senor Gito, you undertake the work, do you?" asked Frank Forrester.

"Yes."

"And will meet the vessels by night that, in sailing by your cottage by day, give you the right signals, and carry the goods to trusted agents in Orleans, Mobile and Pensacola?"

"Yes, Captain Forrester, provided I am disguised in all my dealings with your men, and are known to none of them by name."

"It shall be as you wish, and I feel that neither of us will regret the contract."

"But what will become of your vessel?"

"This one, the other cruiser, or my Jack-o'-lantern, Gito?"

"All of them, senor, I referred to."

"Oh, they may continue to cruise, if my lieutenants so wish, excepting Lantern, and her I will keep as my private yacht."

"Now, let me pay you the amount due you for past services."

"Let me see; we made it twenty-one hundred dollars, I believe?"

"Yes, senor."

"Will you take it in gold or in gems?"

"Precious stones are always the easiest to carry, Captain Forrester, and I prefer them," answered the fisherman.

Captain Forrester arose, walked to one end of the cabin and drew back a divan, after which a rug was taken up, and a trap was discovered in the flooring.

Touching a secret spring, an iron panel flew back and a compartment was revealed, in which was a mass of what appeared to be various kinds of treasure.

Taking up a leather bag, the captain walked with it to the table and from it took a number of diamonds, emeralds and rubies.

"Two of each, Gito, will liberally pay you, for they are worth four hundred for the single stone; but I'll not be grasping with you."

The fisherman glanced critically at the gems, selected six of them, and answered:

"Yes, they are worth more than my debt—but what in Heaven's name is that?"

Both men had sprung to their feet in alarm, while Captain Forrester hastily thrust his gems back into their hiding-place, and sprung on deck, followed by Juan Gito, for the sound that had so startled them was a ringing cry of terror in a woman's voice.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

UPON reaching the deck, Captain Frank Forrester found the under officer on duty, and who was the man that had been pacing to and fro in the ship's waist, wholly unversed by the cry that had burst so suddenly upon his ears.

Up the hatches, helter-skelter, half dressed and terrified, came a score of men, who had been awakened by the piercing shriek, and swayed by superstition, there was not one of them but trembled with the idea that they had heard a death-call and were doomed.

"Petrie, from whence came that cry?" sternly asked Captain Forrester of the under officer.

"The Holy Mother only knows, sir chief, for

it came from the trees, the lagoon, the heavens," answered the man in trembling tones.

"Fool! were you asleep?"

"No, captain. I am not a man to sleep on duty, as you know."

"That is true, Petrie, but why could you not place the cry?"

"I know not, captain, for it seemed to come from everywhere."

"Ha! what does that light mean over the bows?" and Captain Forrester pointed to the glimmer from the skull lantern.

"It is from the figure-head, sir, for the lantern was lit up to guide some of the crew back to the schooner, for they went up the lagoon fishing, and I forgot to put it out, sir."

"You were negligent, and in future I want no lights shown, even if we are in this dismal place."

"Put it out, now, and then lower a boat and have search made for the one who gave that unearthly cry."

The officer walked quickly forward, and soon he called out, in a startled way:

"Oh, captain! come here, please!"

Frank Forrester and Juan Gito walked quickly forward to where Petrie stood leaning over the sharp bows and pointing down into the water.

What he saw there caught the eyes of both men at the same time, and Juan Gito cried excitedly:

"Good God! it is the surf-skiff!"

"And your daughter lies in it either dead or unconscious," answered Captain Forrester, and instantly he swung himself over the bows and dropped into the surf-skiff, the mast of which had lodged against the schooner's bowsprit.

In the bottom of the skiff, beneath the weird glare of the light in the skull of the skeleton figure-head, lay Bessie Gito just as she had fallen back at discovering the fearful eyes of fire glaring into her own.

Taking up her small hand, Forrester touched the pulse lightly, and said:

"She lives, and has only fainted from fright; and no wonder, poor girl."

"Here, Juan, take her up, and carry her to the cabin."

Juan Gito leaned over, and grasping the limp form in his arms, bore it to the schooner's cabin, followed by the captain, while the half-dressed crew gazed on with superstitious dread.

"Well, what in the saints' names can have brought her here?" said Juan Gito, as he laid her upon a sofa.

"Perhaps some trouble at home has caused her to follow you to make it known," responded Captain Forrester.

"No, for all my family are here now, and nothing occurring at the cabin, that I can see, would cause Bessie to come here."

"Well, we will soon know, for she is recovering," said Forrester, bathing her face with a perfumed liquid that spread a delicious odor through the cabin.

As he spoke Bessie's eyes opened, and falling upon her father's face bending over her, she smiled and said:

"Oh, father! I am so glad you awakened me, for I had such a fearful dream—oh, where am I?" and she caught sight of Captain Forrester, and then her eyes roamed uneasily around the cabin.

"You are among friends, Miss Gito, as you may see by your father's presence here, and mine," replied Frank Forrester, in his pleasant way.

"I remember now; it was not a dream then, for I came hither to the Black Lagoon to seek my father, and I discovered, oh, such a hideous object almost touching me, and—"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Forrester.

"You saw the skeleton lantern I hung out forward to scare the fishermen who may come near, and make them believe that this vessel is the Skeleton Schooner."

"You see, Miss Bessie, I am in the service of my country, and bound on special duty, and therefore have to play a part."

"My vessel was damaged severely in a storm some time ago, and I put in here for repairs, and caring not to be recognized as a cruiser, I have to play tricks to deceive the coasters, and this may have been the reason those men from whom you so bravely rescued me mistook me for Forrester, the Freebooter."

"Here, let me offer you a glass of wine, and as your father was just about to start upon his return home, I know he will be glad of pleasant company."

All this was said with such utter freedom

from embarrassment and frankness that Bessie held no suspicion, especially as she beheld her father in friendly intercourse, apparently, with the captain of a vessel she had, when discovering the figure-head, set down at once as the Skeleton Schooner.

Calling his cabin-boy, Forrester ordered refreshments, and half an hour after Juan Gito and Bessie took their departure on board the sail-boat, the surf-skiff being in tow.

As there was no wind felt then in the lagoon, Forrester called away a boat and crew, and himself at the helm towed his visitors out into open water, when he cast them loose with many kind wishes for a speedy and safe return home, just as the eastern skies became gray with the approach of dawn.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CONFESSION.

FROM the time of Bessie's appearance on board the mysterious schooner, Juan Gito had seemed strangely nervous and had little to say.

When Frank Forrester had told her about his vessel being on secret service, and explained the presence of the weird figure-head, he had given her a look of intense gratefulness, and even after the two were alone in the sail-boat, which he had headed down the coast, he hardly appeared to be himself.

True, Juan Gito was always a stern, silent man, but with his daughter he had never shown the cold side of his nature, and seemed fairly to idolize her.

Although he had taught her all manly sports, such as sailing a vessel, rowing, riding a horse bare-back, swimming, shooting, and the like, he had toned her down by sending her to the convent for several years, where she had learned refinement, and shown herself a proficient in music and her studies.

Somehow he treated her as though she were his superior, and was as respectful to her as he could have been to his own mother.

All rumors regarding himself he had tried to keep from her ears, and when incidentally they had come to her, and she had spoken to him regarding what the gossips said, he had explained them away to her entire satisfaction, and told her who he really was, and that an exiled Spanish noble he had been forced to seek an humble home in America.

Her following him to the Black Lagoon, and even finding the mysterious vessel, he could not account for, and it was therefore that he was nervous until he had heard from her lips what she had to tell, for he well knew some important circumstance had brought her there.

Having shaped his course for home, he settled himself by the tiller, and said:

"Come, Bess, lay down and get some sleep, for you need it."

"Father, I cannot sleep," she said, petulantly.

"What ails my little girl, that she is so worried?" he asked kindly, yet fearful that he was really the cause of her trouble.

"A great deal worries me, father, and unable to remain alone at home, I came after you."

"But how did you expect to find me, child?"

"Captain Forrester said his vessel was undergoing repairs in the Black Lagoon, and I knew well where that was, while, as you had promised to come right back as soon as you had taken him there, I felt I would meet you, as the wind was from the Gulf, and I knew the course you must steer."

"But you have often stayed alone at the cabin with no idea of fear."

"True, but then I had nothing to fear as now."

"Ha! have any of the coasters been there to insult you and make you afraid?"

"No, father, I am afraid of myself," she said, bitterly.

"Afraid of yourself, Bess?"

"Yes, father."

"Why, what can you mean?"

"I mean that I am not the girl I was twelve hours ago, for within that time I have learned a secret that has imbibed my whole life."

She spoke with intense pathos, and believing himself the cause of her sorrow, he trembled, and made no reply.

Then she continued after a moment:

"Father, I have a confession to make to you."

"A confession, Bess?"

"Yes, for I have done wrong, though the

Holy Mother knows I did not know how wrong."

"Child, in God's name what do you mean?" the man fairly gasped.

"I have deceived you."

"Deceived me?"

"Yes father, and in turn for my sin I have myself been deceived."

"Bess, for Heaven's sake tell me what you mean?" and he gazed pleadingly into her pale face, to which the gray of early dawn gave an ashen look.

"I mean, father, that I loved one I believed to be all that was true and noble, and urged by him, I, as I believed, became his wife!"

The man let go the tiller and sprung toward her, unmindful that his boat luffed up into the wind, while he cried in a savage tone:

"Bess, who was this man?"

"Mark Mortimer."

"Thank God!"

"Do you thank God for your daughter's shame?" she said with intense scorn in her tone.

"It is no shame for you to become his wife, for he is the one I wished you to marry, though in making the marriage a secret from me you did do wrong."

"You misunderstand me, sir, for I said I married him as I believed, but he cruelly deceived me by a mock ceremony."

"Then by the God above, Mark Mortimer shall die for this!"

"Bess Gito, I swear it!"

The words were shouted in such wild, ringing tones, that they were echoed back from the dark foliage-clad shore half a mile away, and caused poor Bessie to become livid with another dread that seized upon her heart.

CHAPTER XX.

JUAN GITO FORMS A PLOT.

BESSIE GITO had felt most revengeful toward Mark Mortimer, as she had a right to feel, for the wrong done her.

But she still loved him, and her hope was that if her father knew all he would be able to persuade the young man to act honorably toward her.

With this idea in her mind, and so crushed in heart and pride she dared not remain by herself, she had gone to seek Juan Gito, and the result was different from her expectations.

She did not wish Mark Mortimer to die, and above all to have his blood rest upon the hands of her father, and the ringing threat of the fisherman against the life of the man she so dearly loved, caused her to tremble with fear, and brought her upon her knees before Juan Gito.

Clasping her hands she cried earnestly:

"No, no, father, do not say that, for I love him, oh! so very, very dearly."

"Only see him, and bring him back to me, and when he is made to feel the wrong he has done me his noble heart will teach him what is due to me from him."

"Noble heart," sneered Juan Gito.

"Why he has the heart of a snake."

"And yet, father, you said only awhile since that he was the one you wished me to marry," and the maiden's eyes opened with amazement.

The man's face flushed, for he had nearly caught himself by his own words, and he answered quickly:

"True, Bessie, but then I did not know how vile he was in his treatment of my poor child."

"He has wronged you, and he shall die for it."

"No, father, for if you see him and tell him how I love him, he will, I am sure, act honorably."

"I doubt it; but when did this marriage take place?"

"When I was in New Orleans last with you."

"Ah yes, I remember seeing young Mortimer in the city at that time."

"But who married you?"

"We went to a house where Mark said a padre lived, and the man we found there performed the ceremony."

"Well, why do you now say that it was a mock marriage?"

"Because, father, Mark told me only last night that he had paid the man to assume the robes of a priest and read the service."

"He told you this?"

"Yes, father."

"The cold-blooded villain that he is."

"But, Bessie, while you have been talking, I have been thinking, and I have a plot to

carry out in this affair which will make all things right, I believe."

"Will you tell me of it, father?" she asked eagerly.

He made no reply, but stepped back to the tiller, and after getting the little vessel once more on her way, seemed lost in deep meditation, which his stern face forbade Bessie from breaking in upon.

At last he looked up with a smile, and said:

"Bessie, I have had a great many offers for your hand, do you know?"

"I have heard of several, sir."

"There was Carr Gray, captain of the Pensacola packet ship, you remember—"

"A man I did not, nor could ever love, sir."

"Well, there was poor Jean Jewett, whom I picked out of the water last night, and buried on the bank of the Black Lagoon."

"Jean Jewett dead?" gasped Bessie.

"Yes, indeed, drowned night before last in the storm."

"Poor Jean," and the tears came into the beautiful eyes.

"Yes, he was a good young fellow in his way, Bess, a fine sailor, and met a sailor's fate; but to continue, I will say that I had hoped Mark Mortimer would love you, and you return that love, for he was of good stock, had a fine home, and I believed, if a little wild, would tone down under your influence, and if aught happened to me I knew I could leave you well cared for."

"Now that he has confessed to playing you this shabby trick, I will simply compel him to make you his legal wife."

"But, father, he is not one to force into an act."

"Yes he is, when one holds the argument against him which I do," was the significant reply.

"Why, father, you imply that you know some secret of Mark's life you intend to hold in *terrorem* over him."

"No, no, child, I only know that I can persuade him that it is for his good to make you his wife."

"I will accept no terms unless he voluntarily offers them," she said proudly.

"That he will do, and my word for it that he'll kneel at your feet within twenty-four hours, confess his wrong, and ask you to let him make full reparation."

"Ah! if he only would, how happy could I be," cried the maiden, smiling through her tears.

Juan Gito turned his head away to hide the expression resting upon it, while through his shut teeth came the words:

"Yes, Mark Mortimer, I will lower your proud head before long and make you sue for mercy to me, for my plot will succeed, or you shall die, as I have sworn it."

CHAPTER XXI.

A VISIT TO CLIFF CABIN.

"CAPTAIN NORTON, I am in a quandary."

"Can I aid you, Wyndham?"

The speakers were Percy Wyndham and Captain Norton, of the New Orleans City Guard, and the two stood on the deck of the Jack-o'-lantern.

It was the night following the one on which the incidents related in the foregoing chapter happened, and when the sun went down the yacht was two leagues off the shore and heading in toward the cliff upon which, stood the cabin of Juan Gito.

"No, captain, unfortunately you cannot aid me, and I will tell you why."

"I know the coast well from Lakelands, my home, to the lake harbor, near New Orleans, but I am not certain of my bearings about the Black Lagoon, though I have been there."

"But my going there has convinced me of the danger of attempting to run in without a thorough pilot."

"But you have a pilot."

"You mean Lomax?"

"Yes."

"Ah, there's the trouble, for I doubt him."

"I admit he is not to be trusted, for I liked not his behavior regarding the Red Rover; but then clap a pistol to his head, place him at the wheel, and kill him if he fails us."

"A good idea, if he were not sure that we would not wish to alarm the schooner's crew by a shot."

"Then, in these waters, he could run us on a shoal, as though it were the merest accident in the world, and our success depends upon getting alongside the schooner without suspicion."

"Well, I am at a loss to know what to advise," said Captain Norton.

"May I offer a suggestion?"

It was Mabel Mortimer, and her beautiful face appeared above the companionway, revealed by the light behind her in the cabin.

"Certainly, Miss Mortimer," answered Percy.

"I meant not to be an eavesdropper, but your words reached my ears, and it occurred to me that as we were off the Cliff Cottage, an hour ago when the sun set, you might get Juan Gito, the Fisherman of the Lagoon, to pilot you."

"A bright thought, Miss Mortimer, and I thank you for it, as he is the very man, if he will aid us, though rumor has it that he is little less than a pirate himself."

"But he knows this coast well, and if he loves gold he will aid us."

"Well Lomax, what is it?" and Percy Wyndham turned to that individual, who just then approached.

"We are as near inshore, sir, as we ought to go, so I came to tell you that you better wear and stand off again and up the coast."

Percy glanced out over the waters attentively, then shoreward, and stepping up to the man, placed a pistol muzzle against his heart, with a sudden, quick movement.

"Lomax, you are a double traitor, sir, for I happen to know this cruising ground well, and were I to follow your advice, I would put the yacht on a shoal within ten minutes."

"Captain Norton, please put this man in irons and gag him, that there may be no further trouble."

"You promised me my freedom, if I would aid you, and now you break your word," sullenly said the man.

"Your freedom you shall have, with all else promised you; but I see that you, while willing to aid us if compelled to, are still trying to bring the yacht to grief, and I will not depend upon you," sternly replied Percy Wyndham.

"I warn you not to attempt to run into the Black Lagoon at night, without my aid, for you will wreck your vessel."

"I know that, Lomax, and if I do not get a pilot I will see that you take the helm and will risk you there."

"But I will first try to get one who is to be trusted."

"You mean Juan Gito?" sneered the man.

"Yes."

"He'll not pilot you there for the yacht itself, as his interests lie with those you seek, or men lie about him."

"If he does not, you will, but I'll try him first."

Percy then gave an order to lower away the gig, and springing into it with two oarsmen, was rowed rapidly ashore, while the Jack-o'-lantern lay to, to await his return.

He rounded the point of land forming the little bay, and landed upon the shore within a stone's throw of the cabin.

Telling the men to await his coming he ascended to the top of the ridge, and saw a light shining from the open door of the cabin, while just then arose a voice in song.

It was a woman's voice, sweet as a bird's, clear as a flute, and rose and fell with a cadence that was most sympathetic, as she sung the words of an old ballad.

Percy Wyndham stood as though spell-bound, for who could the sweet singer be?

Mabel Mortimer had sung for them, as the vessel had glided over the waters, and her voice was cultivated, rich and beautiful in every note, and yet, from this humble fisherman's cabin came tones that were equally as sweet and as highly trained, while the touch on the guitar that accompanied her was that of a skilled musician.

In silence and deep appreciation Percy Wyndham stood until the song ended, and then, as he advanced once more, there came a rapid and brilliantly executed waltz upon the guitar, the sound of which drowned his approaching footsteps to the ears of the player.

Arriving near the cabin he beheld the fair musician seated within the cosey sitting room.

She had indolently thrown herself upon a sofa, and her hands mechanically, it seemed, swept the strings of the very elegant guitar she held.

Her hair had fallen down from its fastenings, and hung about her like a veil, but half hiding her exquisite form, robed in a dress of pure white.

"The Lady of the Lagoon! Gito's daughter! I had forgotten her very existence," said Percy Wyndham to himself.

He had seen her now and then sailing over the waters, or dashing to the inland village mounted upon her pony: but he had never spoken to her, and now as he beheld her, refined, beautiful, fascinating, he again muttered:

"She is rightly named the Lady of the Lagoon, for lady she certainly is, and a lovely one too."

As her fingers struck the last notes of the waltz, Percy Wyndham stepped forward, when the light from within fell full upon him, and with a half startled cry, Bessie was upon her feet, her grasp upon a pistol that lay near her upon the lounge.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE COIL TIGHTENING.

"PARDON me, lady, my intrusion, but I mean you no harm," said Percy Wyndham, bowing low with uncovered head.

"Mr. Wyndham of Lakelands, I believe?" answered Bessie, dropping her pistol and guitar, and advancing.

"Yes, I am Percy Wyndham, and I believe I address the fair Lady of the Lagoon," he answered in the courteous manner natural to him.

"I am simply Bessie Gito of Cliff Cabin," she returned with a smile, and then added:

"Your presence startled me at first; but will you not come in, though my father is absent?"

"It was to see your father I came, Miss Gito, and I regret exceedingly his absence, though I was rewarded for my coming, by the very delightful treat I enjoyed in your singing, for I have been an eavesdropper."

"You are welcome to be, sir, if my singing gives you pleasure; but I regret that my father is away, and he will not return for a day or two, as he sailed for Mobile this afternoon."

"I am indeed sorry, for my desire to see him was most urgent, as I wished to secure his services as pilot."

"If it is urgent, Mr. Wyndham, may I not serve you as well?" she said with one of her sweet smiles.

"You?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, for I know the coast and lagoons from Pensacola to the lake."

"I remember now to have heard so, and that you are a perfect sailor too, Miss Gito; but do you know the Black Lagoon?"

"Well, sir."

"It is there I wished your father to pilot me."

"It is a most dismal and dangerous locality for a yacht's cruise, Mr. Wyndham, for I suppose you wish to go there in your yacht," she answered.

"Miss Gito, may I trust you?" he asked, after an instant of silence, and as though he had suddenly come to some decision.

She looked surprised, and replied, with some coldness of manner:

"I do not believe, sir, that I have given any one cause to doubt me."

"Do not be angry, but tell me if you can pilot a large vessel into the Black Lagoon at night."

"What is the draught of the vessel?"

"Eight feet."

"Yes, the darkest night I can run her in, but nothing drawing over fourteen feet can cross the bars between the shoals."

"And you know the shoals well?"

"I do."

"Will you make me a promise?"

"If in my power."

"If you do not go as my pilot you will not speak of my presence here to-night?"

"I will not, sir."

"Thank you, Miss Gito, and now I will ask you if you have heard of a mysterious vessel hiding in the Black Lagoon?"

She started at the question, and he saw it, but she answered frankly:

"I have heard that a vessel was undergoing repairs there."

"Do you know the nature of the vessel?"

"I have been told that it was a cruiser."

"Of what nationality?"

"American."

"May I again trouble you to ask how you gained this information?"

She looked slightly annoyed, and then answered:

"Mr. Wyndham, will you tell me your motive for your questions, for if a good one, I

may prevent further trouble to you and to others."

"I will tell you all as soon as I discover by your answer if my suspicions are fully confirmed."

"Will you tell me how you knew of this vessel?"

"Do you know the Shark's Back reef?" she asked.

"Well."

"A yacht from The Everglades was wrecked upon it yesterday, and I took a gentleman off in my surf-skiff, and my father carried him to the Black Lagoon in his boat, for he said his vessel was lying there undergoing repairs."

"Ah! was that gentleman Mr. Frank Forrester, known as a yachtsman, and commander of the Jack-o'-lantern?"

"It was Mr. Forrester."

"And your father carried him to the Black Lagoon?"

"He did, sir."

"And put him on board his vessel?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did your father speak of the kind of vessel it was?"

"It was a schooner, armed, and Captain Forrester said that he was on secret service."

"Miss Gito, have you ever heard of Forrester, the Freebooter?"

"I have, sir."

"Well, let me tell you that, strange as it may seem, the man calling himself Frank Forrester, a yachtsman, and the guest of Mr. Mark Mortimer of The Everglades plantation, is none other than that famous sea rover."

Bessie started at this broad accusation, and answered:

"This is a fearful charge to make, Mr. Wyndham."

"It is a true one, Miss Gito, as I can prove, and I need your services now as pilot to guide the Jack-o'-lantern to the Black Lagoon, for Captain Forrester sent his yacht to New Orleans after a crew, and I went in her in disguise, forced his men to turn traitors, and now have on board of the craft, not half a mile off here, Captain Norton and a number of his City Guard, going to take the mysterious vessel in the lagoon, which I frankly tell you is none other than the Skeleton Schooner."

Bessie Gito was astounded at this, and the weird skeleton light came back to her, the strange appearance of the craft, the attempt of the crew on the wrecked yacht to capture Forrester as the Skimmer of the Sea, and she felt convinced that he must indeed be that famous sea outlaw.

He had been good to her, she liked him, and it seemed hard that she must be the cause of his capture; but then if one-hundredth part of the stories told of his cruelties were true, he deserved a thousand deaths.

"There have been strange whisperings in these parts of late, Mr. Wyndham, and the strangest of all is what you now tell me," she said, slowly.

"Yes, and there is more to tell, Miss Gito, for now on board the Jack-o'-lantern is Miss Mabel Mortimer, of The Everglades, who was kidnapped from her home by a witch-maddened wretch, one Jean Jewett—"

"Jean Jewett?" she cried.

"Yes, a young fisherman that you may have known."

"I did know Jean Jewett well, so speak not against him, for he was a good man, and he is dead," she said, sadly.

"How knew you of his death?" quickly asked Percy.

"My father found his body floating in the Gulf, and buried it."

"Yes, he kidnapped Miss Mortimer, driven mad by superstition, and believing he was commanded by witches to kill her; and he would have done so but for the coming near him, when he was in his open boat, with her bound, of the Skeleton Schooner, which so frightened him he sprung into the sea."

"Some hours after I picked up his boat at sea, and found Miss Mortimer in it, and she is now with me in the yacht, determined to see if Frank Forrester, her brother's guest, is the famous Skimmer of the Sea."

"Now, Miss Gito, you know why I ask your services as pilot."

"And you shall have them."

"Amuse yourself as best you can, while I get ready," and she disappeared in an inner room, leaving Percy to look about him at the air of refinement that rested upon the cabin, and which looked little like the home of a fisherman.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GIRL PILOT.

"He is bringing the pilot back with him, Miss Mortimer," said Captain Norton, who with Mabel Mortimer was watching for the return of Percy Wyndham, while the Jack-o'-lantern lay to upon the waters.

They could see in the darkness that there were four persons returning in the boat, whereas but Percy and two oarsmen had left the yacht in it, and their hopes were high that before long the sharp prow of the Jack-o'-lantern would be pointed up the Black Lagoon.

A four-knot breeze had been blowing, but now it was increasing steadily, and before an hour the yacht would have wind enough to send her bowing merrily away on her dangerous and daring mission.

At last the boat ran alongside of the yacht, Percy gave a low order to hoist it to its davits, and then sprung aboard, and came aft with one who had nimbly followed him.

"Miss Mortimer, may I present Miss Bessie Gito, better known as the Lady of the Lagoon, and now our fair pilot?" said Percy, pleasantly, and then he added: "Captain Norton, of the New Orleans City Guard, Miss Gito."

Mabel had often heard of Bessie, and also had seen her often cruising about the waters in her little boat all alone, when few men would have dared face the storm.

She knew that she was the pride of her fisherman father, and her brother, who had told her of his rescue of Bessie, had said she was even more beautiful than she was, and fully the lady in education and refinement.

She had felt for the girl in her lonely life, and now extended her hand with winning sympathy, while she said, frankly:

"I am glad to meet you, Miss Gito, for you are by no means unknown to me, as my brother Mark has often spoken of you."

Bessie bit her lips at the mention of the name of Mark Mortimer, but said in her soft, sweet way:

"And I am happy in meeting you, Miss Mortimer, while to your brother I owe my life."

Then she turned to Captain Norton, who was deeply impressed by the beautiful being he beheld before him, clad in a jaunty sailor suit of blue flannel, for she had prepared herself for her voyage, and the Lady of the Lagoon he had often heard of, for the sailors had told many yarns about her daring life upon the waters.

"I will now set sail, Miss Gito, and head for the Black Lagoon," said Percy, a few moments after his coming on board.

"How much does your yacht draw, Mr. Wyndham?" asked Bessie, turning from speaking to Mabel.

"Eight feet, I believe."

"No more?"

"No more, and if anything half a foot less."

"Then we will save several leagues by running up by the inner channel."

"But I supposed that only very light-draught boats could go that way?"

"This yacht can if properly managed," was the quiet response.

"She is in your hands, Miss Gito," answered Percy, and ten minutes after the Jack-o'-lantern was gliding along under full mainsail and jibs, and not a quarter of a mile from the dark shores, while at her wheel stood the Lady of the Lagoon, handling her with masterly skill, while Mabel, the young master of Lakelands and Captain Norton stood near watching her every motion and perfect coolness with silent admiration.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TWO PRISONERS.

EARTH, sea and sky are clouded in the gloom of night, and the grand mansion of Lakelands looks somber and still for from no window is a light visible.

Aunt Nance has gone to bed, her daughter Phoebe sleeps in her chair at the door of her mistress, and having made all secure for the night, Uncle Toby has stretched himself upon the settee in the hall to sleep.

But there are two wakeful ones in the mansion, and sleep seems wholly driven from their eyes, though they are not together.

One is the mistress of Lakelands, Mrs. Wyndham, who is now called a maniac, since the day of her duel with Major Mark Mortimer.

The other is Duke, the mulatto slave and body-servant of Major Mortimer, and who, in

attempting to avenge his master's death, or himself, for he knew he must fall from the high pinnacle he had occupied upon the plantation, had nearly lost his life at the hand of Percy Wyndham.

The night he had sailed in the Jack-o'-lantern, Duke had been seized by Percy Wyndham and turned over to Uncle Toby and another negro, with orders to keep him prisoner in the garret of Lakelands until his return, and the prisoner had been confined in what was known as the "strong-room," where were kept the valuables of the family not in use.

The room had a door to enter it, and a round window in one end to give light, and was certainly a secure prison for an ordinary person, and doubly so if that person was in irons.

But Duke was an exceptional personage, strong as a giant, cunning as a fox, and with indomitable pluck and will, and from the first he made up his mind to escape, although he had chains about his ankles and hand-cuffs about his wrists, for Uncle Toby had determined to keep him secure until the return of his master.

Some days and nights had passed away since Percy Wyndham's departure, and yet Duke remained in his prison; but upon the night in question he was wide awake, as was also Mrs. Wyndham, and each was plotting escape.

The mistress of Lakelands felt that she must leave her rooms, her home, or else go raving mad, and perhaps, when away from the influences by which she was then surrounded, she might regain her mind, for she was dazed in regard to the duel, and though she could recall the scenes as they really were, when told by her son, by Toby and her faithful slaves that she was mad to say that she had killed Major Mortimer, it really did turn her brain, for she could see no motive they had in saying so.

How to escape from her prison, for such it seemed to her, she did not know, for her son had had the windows securely barred outside, and no strength of hers was able to remove them.

Long did she sit and ponder over a plot, and then decide to call Phoebe, whom she knew to be on guard without, spring upon her, bind her, and then stealthily leave the rooms by the door thus left open.

As she was about to call, she heard a sound seemingly without, and stopped to listen.

In the strong room Duke had also been plotting how to escape, and at last his ingenious brain hit upon a way.

Hanging to hooks upon the wall he spied several lassoes, brought by Captain Wyndham from Mexico, and these he determined should aid him.

With his ironed hands he took them down, and soon fastened the ends of two of them to the handle of a heavy trunk in the room.

Then he went to the window and looked out.

It was a long distance to the ground, for the house was two stories, a basement and an attic, and his room was in the gable of one wing.

The window was round, hardly large enough for his body to pass through, and yet this was his only chance of escape.

Tying a sword he found there to the end of one of the lariats, he lowered it cautiously from the window to see if it would touch the ground.

It did touch, and just as there was not a foot more of the lasso in his hand.

Then he lowered the other lasso, that the two together might make a larger hold for his hands.

His next act was to take a costly silk dress hanging in the room and securely wrap it around the chains that bound his feet, that they might not rattle.

To get out of the window was the next work in hand, and for a man with four feet of heavy chain about his ankles, and his wrists in irons, was no easy task.

With as little noise as possible, and after hard work, he managed to pile trunks against the wall until they were on a level with the window.

Then he took the third lariat, and passing the end up through his belt, made it also fast to a trunk.

With considerable work he managed to then get his feet out of the window, and gradually worked his body through until at last he hung by his hands far above the ground.

Seizing the third lasso, that passed up through

his belt, he caught a firm grip upon it with his white, strong teeth, and saw with delight that, should his hands give out, he could thus hold his weight to rest them.

Then he grasped the two lassoes and began his descent.

As his wrists were in irons he could move but slowly his hands, and downward he began to go, almost inch by inch.

The iron cut his wrists, the ropes blistered his hands, and still weak from his wound, he felt several times as though he must fall.

But at such times he would grip the lasso firmly with his teeth, and thus hanging in mid-air, would rest his hands.

Nearer and nearer to the ground he descended, until, just as he got level with the top of a small ornamental cedar tree, and knew he must soon triumph, he felt a firm grip upon his throat.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ESCAPE.

FOR a moment Duke was dazed and knew not what to do, as he felt the grip upon him.

He was just opposite to the lower window, and it was not more than a dozen feet to the ground; but there was a brick pavement beneath, and should he drop, in his irons, he might be killed, or at least severely injured, while he would be unable to fly, even should he not be hurt by the fall.

Who it was that had thus seized him he was not left long in doubt, for a stern voice, though a woman's, cried in a low whisper:

"Hold, sir robber, and aid me to escape, or I will call for aid, and the bloodhounds will be put on your track and tear you to pieces."

Duke knew well what those terrible bloodhounds were, and he shuddered while he answered:

"Who are you?"

"I am the mistress of Lakelands, and they have me confined here because they say I am mad."

Duke knew then who it was, and that he had a mad woman to deal with; but, mad or sane, he knew she held him in her power, and he answered:

"I will help you to escape, if you will guide my feet to the sill, for them to rest on, for my hands are giving out."

She quickly did as directed, for the window sill was not a foot away, and, feeling the silk, said:

"You have even stolen my dresses and wrapped them about you, but you can have all if you will only help me to go free from here."

The long intercourse of Duke with his master had freed him from the negro lingo, and his light complexion as a mulatto caused him to appear white in the darkness, and he determined to remain unknown if in his power, so answered:

"I have stolen things from your strong room, madam, but I was sorely in need of them."

"Bring me something with which to pry off this bar, please."

She disappeared in the room, and soon returned with the poker.

"Ah, this will do," and clinging to the lasso with his teeth, and trying to disguise the fact that he was ironed, he succeeded in prying off the heavy bar.

"There, you can pass through that space, and, when I reach the ground, descend by these ropes," he said, as he again swung himself off the sill and began the descent, while in his ears rung the whispered, trembling words:

"Thief though you are, may God forever bless you."

She watched him descend, saw him move slowly away in the darkness, and then hastily gathered together a few articles she felt she would need, thrust her jewel-box and purse in her bosom, and seizing the untasted food and wine upon the table, made all into a bundle.

Slinging the bundle over her shoulder, making ribbons serve as ropes, she wrapped a heavy shawl around her and sprung nimbly upon the window-sill.

Grasping the ropes securely, she committed her weight to them and rapidly descended, hand-under-hand, to the brick pavement below.

All was dark and as silent as the grave, and she glided away in the gloom and made her way through the garden down toward the shore.

Reaching the little pier, she sprung into a light skiff she had always claimed as her own, and glided away in the darkness, her oars hardly making a sound as they rose and fell in the water.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PERCY WYNDHAM'S RUSE.

THE Jack-o'-lantern had gone but a short distance, under her new pilot, before all saw that she was in safe hands.

The wind had increased to a ten-knot blow, and, coming straight from seaward, sent her along swiftly with her sails full and hard.

Percy Wyndham had stepped forward to aid with his strength at the wheel; but Bessie had declined his offer with thanks and the remark:

"She is easy on the helm."

Percy had also noticed how readily the fair pilot rounded shallow points, passed around shoals, and avoided dangerous places which he knew of, and this fact caused him to feel elated with every hope of success.

"Do you see that point of land ahead half a league?" asked Bessie, pointing through the darkness to where a wooded point jutted out from the mainland.

"Yes," answered Mabel Mortimer, to whom the question had been more directly addressed.

"That is our port shore of the Black Lagoon, and when we round it, we will ease off the sheet, and run dead before the wind up the bayou."

"This wind ought to send us up a league or more," said Percy.

"Yes, it will do so."

"How far up lies the schooner?" asked the young leader of the expedition.

"A league, fully."

"Upon which side?"

"Our starboard."

"Thank you," and Percy turned to Captain Norton and gave an order, and that gentleman at once went forward among his men.

Soon he returned, accompanied by Lomax, who walked with difficulty, for he was ironed hands and feet.

"The men are all ready, Mr. Wyndham, and I have brought this fellow aft to witness our triumph in spite of himself," said Captain Norton.

"Is that the traitor pirate whose conduct caused you to suspect him?" asked Bessie.

"Yes, Miss Gito."

"Then I would advise you to gag him, as a voice might do considerable harm just now," was the quiet suggestion.

"I thank you, Miss Gito, and will do so," answered Percy, and in a moment's time he had Lomax securely gagged and bound to the taffrail, the act cutting off the oath of the man bestowed upon the Lady of the Lagoon for her suggestion.

With her eyes piercing the darkness ahead, Bessie held on her course, rounded the point, and then gave the order in a low tone:

"Ease off the sheet halyard."

As the large sail swung off, she rounded into the lagoon, and soon the vessel was gliding along before the wind, with the dark, solemn shores upon either side, and not a hundred yards apart.

"Now, captain," said Percy Wyndham, "I intend to have the lantern on the bowsprit lighted, and to play a ruse upon the schooner, for Captain Forrester will naturally think that it is Lomax returning, as soon as the coming of the yacht is reported to him."

"Yes, so I think," answered Captain Norton.

"When I get in the vicinity of the schooner, if they do not hail us, I shall place my knife-hand against the side of this man, just as he is bound here, and where it will pierce his heart, and then take the gag from his mouth."

"If he obeys my orders, and hails as I demand, well for him; but if he calls out, or attempts to betray us, my knife enters his heart."

"Nod, if you understand me, Lomax."

The gagged and bound man nodded several times, and Percy continued:

"As soon as we find exactly where the schooner lies, I will take the helm and lay the yacht alongside, while you ladies be good enough to at once return to the cabin out of danger."

"Then, captain, you lead your party from the yacht forward, and I will board with mine aft, and the schooner must be carried at all events."

* Certainly, there must be no such word as sail Mr. Wyndham.

"Now come, and let us arm ourselves," said Captain Norton, and the two descended to the cabin together.

In a few moments they returned, armed to the teeth, and saw that the Jack-o'-lantern had rounded the first bend in the lagoon, and was going at a much slower pace from having been cut off from the wind in a great measure.

But she was making two knots an hour, and the weird lantern lighted upon the bowsprit was casting a ghastly gloom ahead over the inky waters.

"When we round yonder bend, Captain Wyndham," said Bessie, "the schooner will not be a cable's length distant," and the words of the fair pilot caused a hush to fall upon all.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CRITICAL APPROACH.

WITH hardly any headway after rounding the second bend of the Black Lagoon, the Jack-o'-lantern moved silently along in the darkness, which now was most dense, excepting for the weird light upon the bowsprit, that had given the name to the pretty little vessel.

Bessie Gito still held the almost useless helm, and stepping to the side of Lomax, Percy Wyndham tore away his jacket and shirt, and pressed the point of his long-bladed knife just over the heart and until it pricked the skin, causing the man to wince as well as he could, bound as he was.

Then he said in a low tone:

"Lomax, when caught in a trap you sided with me, with others of your comrades; but each time where you thought you saw a chance to entrap us and escape yourself, you have tried to do so, or your conduct has certainly had that appearance.

"Now, to guard against all mistakes, I have bad your messmates, who like you are reformed pirates, sent below, and if you do not obey my every order, I will drive this knife to your heart.

"Obey me, and, as I pledged you, you and your comrades are free to go, and I will ask the President's pardon for you if you join with us in the battle, for I shall release you all as soon as we begin the attack.

"Now which will you do?"

"Obey you," was the prompt and whispered reply.

"You are wise.

"Now, Captain Norton, please remove the gag from his mouth, and then go forward, and, Miss Gito, I can manage the wheel now with my disengaged hand, so please return below with Miss Mortimer."

"I will go presently, for there will be no firing until we have boarded the schooner, and then there will be time enough for us to seek safety," answered Bessie.

Just then Captain Norton took the gag from the mouth of Lomax, and walked forward, just as there came out of the shadow of the shore, not three lengths of the yacht away:

"Sloop ahoy!"

"Answer!" said Percy, in a stern whisper, pressing upon the knife.

"Ahoy!" sung out Lomax, in sharp, earnest tones.

"What craft is that?" came the question from the darkness ahead.

"The Jack-o'-lantern, sloop, Captain Forrester, out of New Orleans," replied Lomax, in obedience to Percy Wyndham's command.

"Ay, ay, is that you, Lomax?" came in a different voice, and one in which the two maidens and Percy Wyndham at once recognized the clear ringing tones of Frank Forrester.

"Answer!" sternly said Percy.

"Ay, ay, sir," sung out Lomax.

"Is all right with you, my man?" came the question from the schooner, as though a presentiment of wrong had flashed through the brain of Frank Forrester.

Lomax hesitated, and the moment was critical; but the knife pressed harder over his heart, and Percy Wyndham hoarsely whispered:

"Answer yes, or die."

"Ay, ay, sir," sung out the threatened man, with almost an after cry of pain, for Percy Wyndham was pressing on the knife-point with no light hand.

"Then run in alongside, for there is nothing to prevent," was the order from Captain Forrester, and still holding the wheel, Bessie the next instant laid the Jack-o'-lantern broadside

to the mysterious schooner, whose outlines could barely be traced in the shadows of the foliage and overhanging moss.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TREBLE SURPRISE.

As the sloop ran alongside of the schooner men on both vessels threw and caught fastenings, and instantly over the bulwarks sprung Percy Wyndham, with the cry on his lips:

"Follow me, lads, and this pirate's cruising days have ended."

A wild yell answered his words from the crew of the sloop, and Captain Norton's voice was heard as he and his boarders went on to the decks forward.

"Ha! treachery is it?

"Pirates, fight for your necks, for there are honest dogs come upon us," shouted Frank Forrester, in clarion tones, and he sprung forward to meet the attack, and instantly the fight became fierce and sanguinary.

The lookout of the schooner, warned by the unseen approach of Bessie Gito the night before, was on the alert that night, and, some hours before the approach of the Jack-o'-lantern, had sighted and hailed a small sail-boat coming aboard with but a single occupant.

Though he expected no other arrivals that night, he knew that his captain was awake in the cabin, conversing with the man who had come in the boat, and therefore he was anxious to keep awake.

It was well for him that he did, for some time after he descried a dim light down the lagoon, and he was on his way to report it to his captain, when he met that personage coming on deck.

"It is the Jack-o'-lantern returning," cried Captain Forrester, gleefully, and, as the reader knows, he hit the truth; but he was not a man to be caught napping, and instantly he called up his crew, trained his broadside and pivot-guns to bear upon the approaching craft, put a man at each to discharge them, while he gathered the remainder, just a score, to repel boarders, should the stranger prove a foe.

"You will aid me, if we have to fight?" he asked, turning to the one who had come aboard some time before in a sail-boat.

"Certainly, I never desert a man in trouble," was the reply.

Thus it was that the crew of the schooner were on deck, armed and ready, when the Jack-o'-lantern ranged alongside; but, thrown off their guard, all of them, by recognizing the sloop, and knowing well the voice of Lomax, they were yet taken wholly by surprise when they were suddenly attacked with pistol and cutlass by those whom they believed to be their new allies and messmates.

Upon many a red deck Frank Forrester and his crew had beaten back foes, and it was no new scene for them, and they fought now with desperation, knowing that those that faced them carried a noose for their necks.

But the crew of the sloop had two brave leaders in Percy Wyndham and Captain Norton, and they also fought with reckless pluck, and outnumbering their foes, began to press them back.

Seeing this, Frank Forrester got his men in a compact mass amidships, and said in a low tone to his strange companion:

"Keep them at bay here an instant, while I train the stern pivot upon them."

"Ay, ay," was the response, and the captain glided aft, while the whisper having gone among the pirates of what was to be done, they fought with renewed energy and ferocity.

But Frank Forrester went not at once to the pivot-gun mounted upon the schooner's stern, but glided into his cabin, where he remained fully two minutes.

Then he returned on deck and sprung toward the gun, to wheel it round, the muzzle pointing forward, so as to rake the decks.

With an effort of his great strength he had just moved the gun, when suddenly a clear voice cried:

"Hold! Captain Forrester, surrender or you die!"

One look in the direction from whence came the voice, and a strange sight met his startled gaze, while from his lips broke the cry:

"God above! you risen from the sea, Mabel Mortimer?"

It was indeed Mabel Mortimer, standing upon the bulwarks, clinging with one hand to the stays, and presenting a pistol in the other, and the muzzle covered his heart, while the extended hand was as firm as iron.

But she was not alone, for standing upon the bulwarks beside her, and unaided by any support, was Bessie, the Lady of the Lagoon, and she too was armed, for in one hand was a cutlass, in the other a pistol.

With horror in his face, Frank Forrester sprung backward, as though he had seen a pair of ghosts, and deserting vessel and crew leaped into the waters of the lagoon.

The pirates had seen their captain at the gun, and the next instant beheld other forms there, and believing him killed, by a party attacking over the stern of the schooner, and that they would be between two fires, they broke in confusion, some crying for quarter, others springing over the bulwarks to fall upon the deck of the sloop, or the bank, and more to sink down under the rush of Percy Wyndham and his crew.

"Bravo, lads! the schooner is ours, so cut down no man who cries for quarter," shouted Percy Wyndham, as he seized a man by the shoulder, and presented a pistol to his head.

"You are my prisoner, sir," he said sternly.

"I admit it," was the sullen reply of the man, and he was the one who had come that night in his boat to the schooner, and had told Frank Forrester he would not desert a friend in trouble.

"I have noticed that you were an officer, sir, so shall be sure that you do not escape," said Percy Wyndham, and he added:

"Come with me."

"Oh God! it is you, my father," came a low, earnest cry, and Bessie Gito stood beside Percy Wyndham and his prisoner.

"Your father? Yes, I recognize you now, Juan Gito, and God knows I am sorry to find that rumor has spoken true of you, and that you have been caught fighting on a pirate deck," said Percy Wyndham.

"Father! oh my father! you a pirate?" groaned poor Bessie in agony of grief, as she leaned against the bulwark for support, while the unfortunate man bent his head low and trembled violently, seemingly crushed by the bitterness of the blow that had fallen so heavily upon him in the presence of his daughter, from whose ears he had kept every shadow of suspicion that he was really other than he represented himself to be, no matter what men might say of him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A GOOD DEED RECIPROCATED.

PERCY WYNDHAM seemed as utterly surprised as was Bessie Gito, at the sudden finding of her father upon the deck of the pirate schooner.

He also seemed scarcely less pained, and glanced uneasily around him to note who else had discovered the fisherman in the role of a buccaneer.

The battle lanterns showed that the crew of the sloop had rushed on aft, and were congregated there, discussing excitedly some important matter, and that he, Gito and Bessie, stood alone in the vessel, a little forward of midships, and he was glad to observe that no one appeared to have noticed the painful recognition of the fisherman by his daughter.

These thoughts flashed through his mind like lightning, and pitying the sorrow of the girl, and knowing well that Juan Gito must hang as a pirate, if retained as a prisoner, he said quickly:

"Miss Gito, for your sake I spare your father, and bid him go."

"What! do you do this for me?" eagerly cried the man, raising his bowed head with hope.

"I do it for your daughter's sake, for she has done me a service which I am glad to reciprocate," was the reply.

"Bless you for your noble act, sir," said Bessie earnestly, while Juan Gito remarked in a voice that trembled:

"Whatever your motive, Mr. Wyndham, God bless you for it."

Then turning to his daughter he continued:

"Bessie, I am caught in bad company, I admit, but I can perhaps explain away my presence here; and frankly I pledge myself that Mr. Wyndham shall never regret giving me my pardon this night."

"Do not tarry, or it may be too late, for if you are seen and recognized, I cannot save you," said Percy.

"Thank you, sir, and good-by."

"Bessie, my child, farewell, and to-morrow I will be home."

He walked quickly forward as he spoke, and

they saw him disappear over the bow of the schooner, and then Bessie turned again to Percy, and with a heart too full to utter a word silently pressed his hand, after which she walked slowly away to join Mabel Mortimer whom she saw standing aft with Captain Norton.

Percy soon followed, and said pleasantly:

"Well, captain, thanks to our fair pilot, and to you and your brave lads, we have gained a signal victory, for we have captured the Skeleton Schooner."

"You deserve the praise, Wyndham, and the Navy will want you back in it, I assure you: but, we have lost the Skimmer of the Seas," answered Captain Norton.

"No!"

"Yes, for he escaped."

"Why one of the men said he saw him fall dead from a pistol-shot."

"It is a mistake, for he retreated aft alone, to turn this pivot gun upon us, and Miss Mortimer and Miss Gito boarded over the bulwarks just in time to see his intention and thwart it, and covering him with their pistols he sprung over the stern into the lagoon and escaped."

"This is indeed unfortunate, but I am glad that Miss Mortimer had an opportunity of seeing that the Skimmer of the Seas was in reality Frank Forrester."

"I did so discover, Mr. Wyndham, and have to thank you for being my preserver a third time," answered Mabel, with feeling.

Percy Wyndham made no reply, but turned away, as though to avoid doing so, and ordered a seaman to bring Lomax to him.

At the last moment Lomax had been freed of his irons, and, with those of the sloop's crew that had been pirates, aided in the attack with a vigor that showed they were in earnest, at least, when they knew that there was no hope for their outlaw companions.

As Lomax approached, Percy Wyndham said:

"Well, my man, seeing that you had to, you redeemed yourself, so set to work on the schooner and aid in getting things to rights, and your intended treachery to us will be overlooked."

"I thank you, captain," answered the man, and he turned away to obey his orders, and when the dawn came the schooner was in condition to set sail.

Then Mabel and Bessie went on board the sloop, which was put in charge of a young officer of the guard and a crew, with orders to leave the maidens at their respective homes, and then cruise on up the lake to the nearest point to New Orleans, and there await his coming.

With Bessie at the wheel of the Jack-o'-lantern, the fleet craft stood out of the Black Lagoon, the Skeleton Schooner following close in her wake, and having run the channel of the shoals she kept along the coast while the larger vessel squared away for New Orleans, *via* the Mississippi Delta.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RETURN.

As Mabel Mortimer preferred to accept the offer of Bessie Gito, to carry her home in her surf-skiff, the young officer in charge of the Jack-o'-lantern reluctantly came to off the point on which stood the Gito cabin, and escorted his fair guests ashore in the gig.

Thanking him kindly for his kind attention, they saw him depart, and watched the fast-sailing sloop glide swiftly away up the sound.

Then Bessie led the way to her little cabin home.

All was as she left it, and the cat gave her a joyous welcome, while Mabel said:

"Your father is still away?"

"Yes," and Bessie turned her face away to hide her feelings, and unlocking the cabin door threw it wide open and bade her guest enter.

Mabel had been deeply interested in the fair Lady of the Lagoon, from their first meeting, and the scenes through which they had passed together had greatly endeared her to her, and she gazed upon the pretty cabin with surprise at one in humble circumstances having around her such comforts, nay, luxuries, as were seen upon all sides.

"It is nearly sunset, so we will have tea before starting, if you will honor me with your presence," said Bessie.

"I fear it will cause you to be late in returning home if we delay now, so will accept if you will remain at The Everglades all night," answered Mabel.

"No! no! no! I could not do that, indeed I could not," Bessie cried almost excitedly, remembering whose house it was that she was asked to pass the night in, and fearing that she would meet there the man who had so deceived her.

But, seeing Mabel's look of surprise at her excitement, she added:

"You see, I must be here to welcome my father, and besides I am not afraid to be on the water alone at night."

"Come, I will get tea, while you amuse yourself with my guitar."

Mabel threw herself down in an easy-chair, and took the proffered guitar, running her fingers over the strings with a skilled hand, and praising the tone of the instrument, while Bessie bustled in and out, and soon had prepared a really tempting supper.

It was twilight when they arose from the table, and then taking her oars Bessie locked the cabin and led the way to the shore.

The surf-skiff lay where she had last left it, and pushing it into the water with an ease that surprised Mabel, Bessie bade her guest spring in, and soon they were running swiftly along out of the little basin.

Once around the point Bessie set her leg-of-mutton sail and the surf skiff went skimming lightly over the waters.

An hour's run brought them to the pier of The Everglades, and Mabel begged her new-found friend to accompany her to the mansion; but Bessie was firm in her refusal, and with a hasty farewell turned to go, when Mabel impulsively grasped her hand and said:

"Bessie, now that I have found in you a friend, I do not intend to give you up, so if you will not visit me at The Everglades, I will come to Cliff Cottage to see you."

"You will be ever welcome there, Miss Mortimer, I assure you."

"Miss Mortimer! Call me Mabel, Bessie, and remember, come what may, I am ever your friend."

"I am sorry you will not go to the mansion with me, but you know best."

"Good-by," and kissing her affectionately she turned away, while Bessie sprung into her boat, cast off from the pier, and sailed off in the gloom upon the dark waters, her heart full and bitterly aching, for in a few short hours two men had failed her, the one, as she had believed, *a husband*, the other *a father*.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MASTER OF THE EVERGLADES.

MARK MORTIMER sat alone in the handsome library of The Everglades, his head bent and resting upon his hand, and the light from the lamp falling upon him.

Long had he sat thus in silence, as though overtaken by sleep, or dreaming while awake of scenes of the past, or building castles in air of what might be.

Presently he raised his head and glanced in a tired way around him.

And yet he did not seem to see the elegant furniture inviting repose, the rows of well-bound books, the paintings that adorned the walls, or the superb workmanship of the massive mantle clock.

His eyes seemed to be looking far away, piercing the library wall and resting upon space away off from there.

Rising with an impatient imprecation, so it sounded, he began to pace to and fro, his quick, firm step giving back no sound from the velvet carpet.

He had a dressing-gown on, rarely embroidered, a smoking-cap of velvet and slippers that were evidently the work of some fair hand.

Strangely handsome, he walked in his easy attire and elegant surroundings, and yet he seemed not happy.

Was he thinking that only a short while before his father had been laid out in that very room, shot down by one whose hand joined The Everglades?

Was he mourning for that father, who had so loved his only son that he had paid his large gambling debts, given him money and allowed him free rein, until at last his wild boy had squandered the inheritance that should have been his?

If such were not his thoughts, perhaps he was thinking of how he had avenged that father by killing Captain Wyndham, a man who had not taken the life of him whom he sought to avenge.

Was it remorse eating into his soul that

brought that shadow to his brow, that muttered curse to his lips?

Or may it not have been of poor Bessie Gito that he was thinking, and how he had fascinated her, as a snake does a bird, to in the end most cruelly wrong her and cast her off?

The thought that his cruelty might break her heart, may have caused the cloud upon his brow.

And again, his meditations might have been of another fair being, she who called him brother, and who was the heiress of The Everglades, the one upon whose bounty he would have had to live had she not gone out upon the dark waters one night and returned not.

That sister, the beautiful Mabel, who had been left to his guardianship by their father's will, and who, loving no man, he had urged to engage herself to one whom he knew to be a profligate and a gambler, a man who held no mercy for men or women, a man who had forgiven him his large gambling debt to him and paid him a handsome bonus to drag down that young being whose veins held the Mortimer blood, as his did, as his wife, when there was dishonor in the name where Frank Forrester was the husband.

All these thoughts may have flashed through his mind as he had sat in silence there, and as he paced to and fro, and remorse and sorrow may have set his lips and shadowed his brow: but, presently those lips move, mutterings are heard, and then he speaks aloud, and the reader knows which is the truth by his own words.

"Well," he says in a low but distinct tone:

"I have freed myself of poor Bessie, but she will soon marry some fisherman and forget all about me, so what need I care, especially as I will have wedded a fortune."

"Poor Mabel is gone, and I shudder to think of it, though by my father's wisdom, her death leaves me master here, and thanks to the sale of her hand to Forrester, I have ample to pay my indebtedness and start with a clean record, as far as debt is concerned."

"I have planned, plotted and executed well, and I must hold what I have won."

"Bah! I forget that fellow Wyndham, who may call me out at any time to square the account of my killing his father, and there is more to him than I supposed, so I must look to my pistol and sword practice that I be caught not napping, as he is a dangerous adversary, or he never would have killed the major my father."

"Well, I am glad that Forrester has gone, for I half fear that man, and I wonder what mysterious affair he has gone on, for his actions all seem shrouded in mystery."

"He certainly took Mabel's death coolly, for a newly engaged lover, and would hardly believe that she was dead, while I did not like his laugh when he said that as she was to have been his wife, had she lived, and The Everglades to have been his home, he guessed he would have to win the plantation, negroes and all from me at cards."

"I'll be careful not to play with him, for I know but too well his luck, or cheating, which I have not yet been able to discover."

"And Duke; what can have become of him?"

"Outside of his pecuniary loss, for he was valuable as a slave, I have lost one who would serve me as well as he did my father."

"I have not seen him since I sent him with Forrester's papers down to the yacht that night, and he may have sailed on the Lantern, though I cannot understand his doing so without leave — hal! what sound is that?"

"By Heaven! it is you, Duke, and your coming but carries out the old saying:

"'Speak of the Devil and his imps will appear.'

"But what in Satan's name is the matter with you?"

"I am in irons, hand and foot, master," was the reply, as Duke shuffled into the long, open window which led out upon the piazza, and Mark Mortimer beheld his handcuffed wrists and chained ankles.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DUKE'S STORY.

THAT something of an uncommon nature had happened to Duke, Mark Mortimer saw at a glance, for the negro looked wan and haggard, his hands were ironed, and the wrists and palms bleeding, while he was hatless, coatless, and about his ankles was a huge roll of silk.

"In Heaven's name, Duke, what ails you?" cried Mark in utter amazement.

"There's a great deal the matter, master," answered Duke with a sad smile.

"So it looks, and I would like to hear what has happened to you, and where you have been."

"Master, my tongue can talk better when my hands and feet are free of irons," was the significant reply.

"True, I will send for the blacksmith and have these chains knocked off, and—"

"No, no, master, I do not want any of the hands* to see me in irons, and that is why I came to you here, sir."

"Well, what can I do to get them off, Duke, for I have never studied the art of blacksmithing you know," was the reply of the young aristocrat.

"Master, your father, sir, had a bunch of keys that could be made to fit any lock."

"He kept them in that drawer, sir," and Duke pointed to a locked drawer in the elegant desk near by.

"Yes, I saw them and pitched them into the closet yonder," and going to the designated spot Mark Mortimer hunted around among some rubbish and soon found the bunch of keys.

After a little trouble one was found to fit the irons on the wrist, and these were soon taken off, when the young man handed the keys to Duke to help himself, for he was one of those persons always unwilling to do anything that looked like work.

Duke tried key after key upon the padlocks securing the chains about his ankles, and of course it was the *last one* that fitted the locks.

Unlocking them he gave a sigh of relief, and straightened up to his full height, a splendid specimen of manhood, though he was a slave.

"Now, Duke, give me your story," said Mark Mortimer with some impatience.

Duke gave a quiet smile, for he remembered how different had been the father from the son, for Major Mortimer had treated his trusted and faithful slave more as an equal than one in servitude, and when alone together, the negro had always been asked to take a chair.

Now, weary, suffering, bleeding, and just freed of galling irons, his young master allowed him to stand.

"I am ill, master, and would like to sit down with your permission, sir," he said with some reproach in his tones.

It was the reproach that Mark Mortimer noticed, and he answered in an angry tone:

"Sit down then if it suits you, and then keep me no longer in suspense."

"You remember, master, the night you called me up and asked me if I had sufficiently recovered from my wound to be of service to you?"

"Yes, what then?"

Captain Forrester gave me some papers to carry on board his yacht and to deliver to Boatswain Lomax."

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I started with the papers, as you know, and was met upon the beach by one who took them from me."

"Ha! this is a strange story; but one man, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Took those papers from you?"

"Yes, master."

"Duke, I know that you possess great strength, and never before have I heard of any man who could master you."

"Master, I have just recovered from a severe wound, as you know, sir, and have not regained my former strength; but had I been in good health that man could have mastered me."

"Who in Satan's name was he?"

"Mr. Percy Wyndham, sir."

"Ha! by the gods of war, but this becomes interesting."

"He it was, sir, and he is a giant in strength, in spite of his slender form, for he handled me with an ease that was remarkable."

"He doubtless wished to kill you, in revenge for your having shot him the day he killed my father."

"No, sir, he made no attempt to kill me, but he took from me my papers—"

"He took those papers given you by Forrester?"

"He did, sir, and called two of his slaves, old Toby and Caleb, to bind me and carry me off."

"You are sure it was Wyndham?"

* The plantation negroes south are spoken of as "field hands," or "hands."—THE AUTHOR.

"Certainly, sir, though he was disguised by a beard and rough sailor suit."

"Then he got into a boat and rowed out to the yacht, which at once set sail in spite of the blow that was coming up."

"This is astounding news, Duke, and Percy Wyndham has played a bold game against Frank Forrester, which he will be held accountable for."

"But has he returned?"

"No, sir."

"You know this?"

"I do, sir; but has Miss Mabel been found?"

"No."

Duke made no reply, but the expression on his face spoke volumes and Mark Mortimer said:

"You have some idea you have not made known?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then speak out."

"Well, master, Mr. Percy Wyndham saved the life of Miss Mabel, and—"

"Ha! who told you this?"

"I heard you talking to the captain about it, sir."

"Ah, yes. Well?"

"And as he took the yacht and set sail, and Miss Mabel went about the same time, I thought—"

"Duke! don't you dare say that one of my blood has fled with one who bears the name of Wyndham," almost yelled Mark Mortimer, with rage.

"Forgive me, master; but it did look strange, for you say Missy Mabel hasn't been found, and Mr. Wyndham is still away from home, and the yacht has gone too."

"How know you that Mr. Wyndham has not returned home?"

"I just came from there, sir."

"You have been at Lakelands?"

"Yes, sir, since Mr. Wyndham made me prisoner that night."

"By Heaven, but the plot thickens."

"I was put in the garret strong room, and heavily ironed, as you saw, master, by old Toby and Caleb; but I managed to escape, with the aid of some Mexican lassoes, all bound as I was, though you can see I blistered my hands badly, and the irons cut my wrists."

"Ah, you've got pluck, Duke, and I am glad you got away, for I feared you had been killed."

"As it is, I can make this Percy Wyndham suffer for stealing one of my slaves."

"But continue your story."

"When I was coming down on the lassoes, sir, I was seized by a hand from a window, and it was Mrs. Wyndham."

"They say she is mad."

"Yes, sir, she is; but she mistook me for a midnight robber, and threatened to cry out unless I aided her to escape."

"What?"

"True, sir, for her son had her imprisoned in her rooms, and heavy bars of wood fastened on the outside of the windows."

"I knew that I could not run, and that the bloodbounds, if put on my track, would tear me to pieces, so I asked her to get me the iron poker, and prying off the lower bar, I then went on, and came on here, sir."

"And Mrs. Wyndham?"

"She was coming out of the window as I left, sir, and as I hobbled along the shore, I saw her put off from the pier of Lakelands in a small skiff."

"Which way did she go?"

"Straight out into the Gulf, master."

"Well, Duke, there is some strange mystery in all this, and I will solve it; but I need your aid."

"Now go to bed, and to-morrow we will talk it all over, and if I do not mistake, I can avenge myself on Percy Wyndham in a way that will be worse than death to him."

Duke took up his irons and left the room, walking with evident pain, and once more was the young master of The Everglades alone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A DREAM THAT WAS REAL.

FOR a long time after the departure of Duke, Mark Mortimer remained in troubled thought.

The story of the slave had been a remarkable one, and he could in no way think what had been the cause of Percy Wyndham's running off with the Jack-o'-lantern, nor why he had taken the papers from the negro.

Then Mrs. Wyndham's escape puzzled him, for whither had she gone.

Had she some motive in her escape that had him as an object, or was it the mere freak of a madwoman?

"As for this silly idea of Duke's, that Wyndham has run off with Mabel, that is ridiculous, for I know what her fate has been," he said as he paced to and fro.

Presently he threw himself into an easy-chair, and worn out with mind-worry he at last sunk into a deep sleep.

The lamp burned as brightly above him, the breezes without blew as balmy, and tired nature was soothed to repose.

And as he slept the workings of his waking mind shaped themselves into visions in his dreams.

Fancies innumerable flitted before him.

First he was fighting a duel with Captain Wyndham, and he dreamed that he fell, and there came to him thoughts of his punishment after death, and he writhed in his chair, and beads of sweat broke out upon his brow as he felt the torture of Hades gnawing into his vitals.

Then a fair vision flitted before him; he clasped it in his arms and found it to be Bessie Gito, but an instant changed the beautiful face and form of the maiden into a skeleton, with grinning skull facing him, and with a cry of fright he thrust it from him, yet still slept on when the horrid nightmare had vanished.

For a while then he slumbered peacefully, and then came vivid pictures before him once more, and he was struggling in the lagoon with a huge alligator, which suddenly, as he was dying, took the shape of Bessie Gito.

Uneasily he moved in his chair, as these visions haunted his dreams, and then one more appeared before him.

He seemed to hear a cry out upon the dark waters, which were lashed to fury with a storm.

He listened, and the cry was in his sister's voice.

He heard her, he saw her, in his dream, and she was sinking down, down into the depths, and he stretched forth no hand to save her.

Then she disappeared, and he turned away and entered his home.

But lo, suddenly, in the darkness of night there came a wild cry from the negroes, and before him appeared a ghost.

It was the face and form of Mabel his sister, and she came directly toward him, her finger pointed at him with reproach.

He tried to fly, but could not, for his limbs refused to obey his will.

He tried to cry out in alarm, but his tongue clung to the roof of his mouth.

He strove to motion the dread form away, but his hands lay motionless in his lap.

Then, with a mighty effort, as the form drew nearer, he awoke, and springing to his feet with a cry of horror, sunk back into his chair, livid, trembling, but awake.

"Brother, have you gone mad, for I have tried to waken you for five minutes."

His eyes were wide open now, his mouth too, and he gazed in horror at the speaker.

It was indeed his sister Mabel.

She stood before him, clad in the same white dress she had worn when a week before she had been carried out upon the water by Jean Jewett, the witch-baunted fisherman.

The dress was no longer spotless, for she had had no change, and around her shoulders was a wrap loaned her by Bessie.

She looked worn, yet not unhappy, and she stood by the side of her brother, her small hand resting firmly upon his shoulder.

"Brother, is this your welcome to me, who have returned to you as from the grave?" she asked, in a reproachful tone.

"But you are from the grave, at least from the depths of the sea, Mabel, are you not?" he asked, in a shivering voice, and with downcast eyes, for he dared not look upon her.

"No, I am in my own flesh and blood, though in need of rest, and sadly disarranged in toilet.

"I did not die, as you seem to have thought, for my life was marvelously saved, and half an hour ago I landed upon the pier, and seeing Lawrence, the boatman, called to him, and he fled like a deer from me.

"Then I went to the kitchen, and old Dinah lies in a swoon, for she fell at sight of me, and her husband, Ned, rushed out into the garden yelling, while Fidele, my maid, I think has been taken with a fit, for I met her in the hall.

"Coming here to seek you, I find you writh-

ing in your chair, as with some terrible nightmare, and in striving to awaken you, I almost feared you would die of fright.

"Truly, brother mine, I have a strange welcome in my own house."

With a mighty effort Mark Mortimer cast off the dread upon him, and convinced now that it was his sister *in propria persona*, and not in ghostly form, he tried to atone for his fright by saying:

"Well, sis, you are indeed most welcome; give me a kiss, and let me know how it is that I find you alive."

His words were cold, in spite of his effort to appear enthusiastic, and she returned not his kiss, but said:

"You had better look after old Dinah, Ned, and Fidele, while I go to my room, Mark."

"But you have not told me how you escaped death, sis."

"Curse the darkies, let them die of fright, but tell me about yourself."

"I was saved from drowning by one with whom those of our name hold a cruel vendetta."

She spoke impressively, and her brother sprang to his feet with a smothered oath, while from his lips fairly burst the name:

"Percy Wyndham?"

"Yes, brother."

"Oh! curses rest upon him and all of his name."

"For saving the life of your sister, Mark?"

He saw the scorn in her words and he winced, while she continued, and in an imperious tone:

"Mark, you may carry the vendetta on if so you will, but for my part the hatchet lies buried, as I owe my life, and more, to one who killed our father, which father, I know, had bitterly wronged those of his name."

"There are graves between the Wyndhams and the Mortimers that prevent the hand of friendship being grasped across them, but from my heart all bitterness against Percy Wyndham has gone, I frankly admit."

"When you are in different humor I will tell you all that happened to me, but now—"

"Hold, Mabel Mortimer, I would hear now where you have been for days and nights with this wretched villain and negro-thief!" he shouted in anger.

She turned calmly toward him and gave answer:

"Well, Mr. Frank Mortimer, as you desire to know, to give you more occasion for nightmare to visit your dreams, when you have retired for the night, I will simply say that I have been all these days and nights on board the yacht Jack-o'-lantern, which Mr. Percy Wyndham seized, manned with a crew, and last night boarded and captured in the Black Lagoon the Skeleton Schooner, whose commander you caused your sister to enter into an engagement with, and who is none other than the noted Skimmer of the Sea, Forrester the Freebooter, or Frank Forrester, gambler and yachtsman as you like best to call him."

The man was livid now, and the veins stood out on his forehead like whip-cords.

He essayed to speak, but could not, and, as Mabel turned and walked from the room he beckoned to her to remain.

But she heeded not his call, and he sunk down in his chair, with a groan, while he murmured:

"At last the mystery is solved—Frank Forrester is the Skimmer of the Sea."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MABEL'S STORY.

It was very late when Mark Mortimer arose to breakfast the following morning, for he had only sunk to sleep, and a troubled slumber at that, when the sun came peering through his blinds.

Duke having taken the duties of valet upon himself toward his new master, as for the old one, he went to his room about ten o'clock to say that Fidele reported Miss Mabel ready for breakfast.

As for Duke, he had rapidly recuperated with a few hours of rest, and was almost himself again in looks, though a little weak and a trifle haggard.

But he was dressed in a neat suit of white duck, and quite surprised Mark with his appearance when he called him.

"My sister is ready, you say, Duke?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, and I tell you, master, she scared most of the kitchen brigade to death last

night, sir, and Fidele hasn't gotten over it yet, quite."

"She startled me, too, Duke, for I had dropped to sleep in my chair; but thank God she has returned."

"Did you hear of her miraculous escape?" asked Mark, anxious to know what story of her rescue Mabel had told, for he knew it would spread from one plantation to another like wildfire.

"Yes, sir; she said she was picked up adrift in an open boat, having been kidnapped by some man, and that the craft that rescued her was bound to New Orleans, so that she could only get back last night, so Fidele says."

Mark Mortimer gave a sigh of relief, for he felt that the secret of who had been the rescuer had been kept by his sister.

"Yes, her escape was a wonderful one; but who her kidnapper was I cannot imagine."

"It might have been Mr. Percy Wyndham, sir," suggested Duke, who thirsted for revenge against that young gentleman.

"Ha! it may have been, and I will look more closely into the matter, for if Mr. Percy Wyndham is a kidnapper of young ladies, as well as a stealer of my slaves, he will get himself into more serious trouble than can the duel be to him."

"Now tell my sister that I will be with her soon."

Duke departed upon his errand, and ten minutes after Mark Mortimer descended to the breakfast-room.

It was a lovely room, with windows upon one side overlooking the flower-gardens, and on the other commanding a view of the water.

Costly paintings hung upon the walls, the tables and chairs were of solid mahogany, and massive; the sideboard groaned with the weight of silver upon it, and throughout it presented the appearance of the wealth and cultivated taste of the owner.

Mabel stood by the window looking out upon the placid waters, barely rippled by a breeze, and her thoughts seemed to be down in their depths, where then her form would have been had not she been saved by Percy Wyndham.

She was dressed in a robe of pure white, heavily trimmed with lace, and which had a train reaching a yard behind her.

A blue scarf encircled her neck, gold buckles were upon her tiny slippers, and a comb of the same precious metal upheld her beautiful hair.

Otherwise she wore no ornament of jewelry, not even a finger-ring.

Lovely she certainly did look, though a little pale, and turning as her brother entered, she seemed ready to bury the hatchet, and greeted him with a pleasant good-morning and a kiss.

Mark Mortimer talked rapidly throughout breakfast, never once touching upon her adventure and return, and seeming, by incessant conversation, to wish to avoid the subject.

But, when the two strolled out under the large live oaks dotting the lawn and took a seat upon a rustic settee, the brother said, nervously:

"Now, Mabel, tell me of your remarkable adventures."

"Well, brother, the very afternoon of my engagement to your intimate friend, Forrester, the Freebooter, or, as I knew him then, Captain Forrester, the young fisherman, Jean Jewett, of whom you know, came along the shore in his boat, and begged me to run across to a point of land where he said he had left a dying comrade, wounded by a shot from a passing vessel, supposed to be a pirate.

"He wanted a priest, he told me; but knowing that his friend would die before one could be gotten to the wounded man, I consented to go at once with him, and soothe as best I could his last hours."

"I got into his boat and went with him, although night and a storm were coming on."

"Then I found I had trusted myself to a witch, maddened wretch who sought to kill me."

"He bound me in the boat, and I know would have taken my life, had I not prayed to the Virgin to save me, and just then what should come along but the Skeleton Schooner."

"The wretch saw it, said that he was doomed, and, as it came straight toward us, sprung into the sea, leaving me bound in the boat."

"The Skeleton Schooner passed near, and I noticed that she seemed badly crippled in her spars; but no one on board saw me, and the storm came on, and I would have been drowned, for I was securely bound, had not the Jack-o'-

lantern sighted me, and Pe cy Wyndham taken me on board."

"And then, Mabel?" asked Mark with an ugly sneer.

"And then he would have landed me at The Everglades, but he frankly told me his mission, and fearing the return of the sloop would destroy all, I went on to New Orleans with him."

"And that mission, Mabel?" asked Mark with the same sinister look.

"Was to capture the Skeleton Schooner and her captain."

"He went to the lake harbor, took the boatswain of the Jack-o'-lantern on with him, got him into a trap, forced him to confess all about the pirate vessel, before Captain Norton of the City Guard, and then set sail in the Jack-o'-lantern for the Black Lagoon."

"And captured the vessel?"

"Yes, for Captain Norton accompanied Mr. Wyndham, with fifty good men, and, fearing to trust the treacherous pirate Lomax, he got that strange but beautiful girl, Bessie Gito, to act as pilot."

"What?"

"Yes, she piloted the sloop to the Lagoon, Mr. Wyndham and his allies boarded the vessel, and after a short, sharp fight, captured her."

"And Frank Forrester also?"

"No, he escaped."

"Ah! then I do not believe that he was the pirate leader," cried Mark exultantly.

"But I know it, Mark, for I saw him, and it was at sight of me, and my demand for him to surrender, that caused him to jump into the lagoon and escape."

"And where is this gallant Percy Wyndham now?" sneered Mark.

"Gone to New Orleans, round by the Delta, with his captured vessel, to deliver it up to the Government, while the Jack-o'-lantern brought me home."

"Curse him! he will get a lieutenant's commission for that, if he cares to go back into the navy."

"Yes, and he will deserve it, for it was a most gallant capture."

"Now, brother, I wish you to have Duke arm some of the slaves, and have them sleep in one of the rooms of the mansion at night, for I fear that man Forrester, when I know just what he is, and that he is free to commit any mischief he has a mind to do."

"I will see to it, Mabel; but give yourself no alarm on that score," answered Mark Mortimer, who seemed deeply moved by all he had heard.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE GHOST OF THE LAGOON.

"Oh, Missy Mabelle, I saw a ghost! I saw a ghost!"

The speaker dashed into Mabel's room several days after her return home, and startled her with the above announcement.

It was Fidele, Mabel's quadroon maid, and who spoke English with a slight accent, always calling her mistress Missy Mabelle.

The girl was pretty, as most of the Creole quadroons are, *petite* and vivacious, and now she was thoroughly scared, and looked it.

"Nonsense, Fidele; you have been frightened at your own shadow," said Mabel.

"Missy Mabelle, I am scared, I know, but it was not my own shadow, but a real live ghost."

"A live ghost, Fidele?" asked Mabel, with a smile.

"For true, missy."

"Tell me about it, Fidele."

"Well, Missy Mabelle, you see I went out into the magnolia forest to get you some flowers, and they are best near the Lakeland's Cemetery, and so I walked over there."

"I had a big bunch gathered, Missy Mabelle, when I looked over toward the lagoon, and—Lordy—I saw a white skiff coming downstream, and in it a ghost all dressed in white."

"Nonsense! it was some of the Lakeland's negroes."

"No, Missy Mabelle, it was a white ghost, and niggers don't make white ghosts, do they?"

"Whether they do or not I am not prepared to answer, Fidele; but did you see the—well, say ghost, distinctly?"

"Yes, Missy Mabelle, as distinctly as I see you now, for it was broad moonshine, only the woods were so thick it didn't shine there, and therefore was kinder dark."

"But I saw the ghost, and it was a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes, missy, 'thout it was a young man ghost, and men ghosts wear long robes like women."

"How near were you to this apparition, Fidele?" asked Mabel.

"Well, missy, before I could get my feet to move right, it landed, and then it came straight toward me, until it was not fifty feet away."

"Then I did go, Missy Mabelle, 'deed I did, and here I am, but I saw the ghost, and I left it the magnolia flowers."

"Well, Fidele, I do not know how to account for this strange story; but do not speak of it to any one, and we will see if others also see your ghost," said Mabel.

And others did see the ghost, for there were a score of negroes from both Lakelands and The Everglades that beheld the white-robed form either near the burying-ground or paddling upon the waters, and it was but a few days before the "Ghost of the Lagoon" became the talk of the plantations along the coast for leagues.

But though Mark Mortimer had gone with Duke and remained a day and night in the forest ghost-hunting, they had failed to capture the strange apparition, though both had seen it, chased it, and beheld it glide away from them at a speed they could not equal, and disappear near the lagoon shore.

This fact set Mark Mortimer to thinking, and gave him another cause of inquietude.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MASTER OF LAKELANDS RETURNS.

THERE was one favor which Percy Wyndham had asked of Bessie Gito, upon parting from her, and that was that she would request her father, upon his return to the cottage, to go over to Lakelands and request Caleb to come over to the lake harbor, in the Glide, the yacht which had belonged to his late father, and bring with him a crew of ten negroes.

As her father did not return as soon as she had expected, Bessie took upon herself the fulfillment of this request, and going to Lakelands by night, delivered to old Uncle Toby the message from his master, which resulted in Caleb at once sailing in the Glide to the lake harbor near New Orleans.*

In the mean time the Skeleton Schooner had gone on her way without mishap, though she had been recognized and hotly chased by a British cruiser, and shown her speed in a most masterly manner, as Percy Wyndham did not wish to be overhauled by a foreign vessel.

Ascending the Mississippi, to the consternation of many coasters that recognized her, Percy ran her to anchorage opposite the city just at sunset, and going ashore with Captain Norton, reported to the Government naval officer then on duty at that station.

The result was that the city shook with the salvos of guns fired in honor of the occasion, and Percy Wyndham was lionized by one and all.

"You must carry the vessels and the glad tidings to the Government, Wyndham, and my word for it, you wear a lieutenant's straps for your good work," said the commodore.

"No, thank you, sir, but I conclude my work by delivering the vessel over to you, and asking you to get the pirates pardoned that aided us, and to see that the reward and prize money goes to Captain Norton and his men," modestly returned Percy.

"But you deserve some recompense, Wyndham, surely."

"I am rich, sir, and need no pecuniary reward; but I will keep the tender and decoy of the pirate chief as my own vessel, for it is a little craft that I am anxious to own."

"You refer to the Jack-o'-lantern?"

"Yes, sir."

"Certainly, for as a prize it is certainly your property; but I regret that you do not wish to go back into the navy, where as a midshipman you stood well."

"I have an invalid mother, sir, to look after, and a plantation that will demand my entire care, so shall keep in private life, commodore, though I will confidentially state to you that I have a hope of capturing Forrester, the Freebooter, and shall endeavor to do so."

* Many of the negroes on the coast and Gulf plantations are good sailors, and some of them excellent navigators, capable of taking charge of large vessels.—THE AUTHOR.

"Good! Persevere in that good work, my young friend, and you will nobly and well serve your country, for piracy in the waters of the Gulf is a great curse to us now."

After a short while Percy Wyndham took his leave of the commodore, and refusing all invitations, and avoiding those who wished to lionize him, he drove out to the lake, where he found his Jack-o'-lantern awaiting him, and his own yacht, Glide, just coming to anchor.

The crew on board the Jack o'-lantern were well paid for their services, and being set on shore Percy took six of his negro crew from on board the Glide, and set sail for home, leaving Caleb to follow in the smaller yacht.

But head winds retarded him, and it was a slow run the two pretty vessels made to the harbor in front of Lakelands.

It was night when the anchor of the Jack-o'-lantern was let fall, and the Glide was but half a mile astern.

Springing into a boat Percy Wyndham was rowed ashore, and it was no wonder that he felt a conscious pride in what he had accomplished since his departure two weeks before.

He had made up his mind to have an interview at once with his mother, urge, and receive a pledge from her that she would allow the secret of her killing Major Mark Mortimer a secret still, and that the world might still believe that his hand had been the one that shot him down.

Then he would tell her that it was to protect her that he had taken upon himself the responsibility of the duel, and had maintained it, as she in her nervous state might confess all.

"Once the cloud of doubt is banished from her, and she will be the same dear mother as of yore, and if we cannot be happy at dear old Lakelands, on account of the shadows hanging over us, we can at least live away from here, where no pall rests upon us," he said to himself as he walked toward the mansion.

Ascending the broad piazza step she knocked at the door loudly, and then while awaiting a response, and listening to the echoes of the huge brass knocker, he turned his gaze over toward The Everglades.

A light was burning in the library, and another in one of the upper rooms, which he knew was the boudoir of Mabel.

He sighed as he looked, and then turned as old Uncle Toby opened the door.

"Thank God, master, you is back again," said old Toby most fervently, stretching forth his hand which Percy grasped warmly.

"All going right, Uncle Toby?" he asked.

"No, master, all goin' wrong!" was the sad reply.

"My mother?" gasped the young man.

"God knows where she is, master."

"Good Heavens! Is my mother not here Uncle Toby?"

"No, master."

"Speak, man, and tell where she is," he said, sternly.

"Well, master, to begin at the first: we brought that nigger Duke home and put him in the garret strong room, putting handcuffs on him, and chaining him around the ankles with padlocks fastened in the links, sah."

"Then, sah, I kept the key of the do', and I took him his wittals myself."

"But, master, the other morning my gal Phoebe come running to me with the news that mistis wasn't in her rooms, sah."

"Good God!"

"Yes, sah; and I went to see, and I found the lower bar had been pried off with the poker, for it lay outside the winder, sah, and then I saw three of those Mexican lassoes hanging down from the garret winder."

"I went up there, sah, fast as my old legs could carry me, sah, and I found that nigger Duke gone."

"He had not got his irons off, sah, but he had taken the ropes and hung 'em out of the little winder, and got on trunks, and slipped out himself, and he must have been seen by mistis, who got him to let her out too."

"This is remarkable, Toby, but have you had no word from my mother?"

"No, sah, for I jest took the ropes in, and me, the old 'ooman, and Phoebe have kep' quiet about mistis being away until you came back, sah."

"And Duke?"

"He must have tied the irons up with something, master, for I saw where his feet had been dragged along through the garden to the shore, and I missed one of the light skiffs, sah; but he is all right at The Everglades, sah, for I

watched the place a whole day with the glass, and I saw him."

"Then he has told his master all, I suppose?"

"Yes, sah, and Missy Mabel Mortimer has got back, and wasn't drowned after all; but they say she was kidnapped, and a vessel picked her up at sea in a boat."

Percy Wyndham, in spite of his distress at his mother's escape, smiled at this piece of news, but said:

"Well, Uncle Toby, nothing can be done tonight, but in the morning I will have thorough search made for my poor mother, and she must be found at all events, for, Toby," and his voice slightly trembled, "she may do herself some harm, or may already have done so."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE ESCAPE.

WHEN Juan Gito left the deck of the schooner he seemed to care little whither he went.

The crushing blow that had fallen upon him, in the knowledge that his beautiful daughter knew him as he was, a pirate, nearly maddened him.

He had been a man of honor, was a noble, as he said he was, and had held high authority in Spain.

But in an evil moment he had been led to plot against his monarch, and being found out, had been forced to fly for his life, with the brand of exile upon him.

He had long lain ill in America, and kindly cared for by one who had tenderly nursed him in his sickness, he had made her his wife.

In a strange land, without friends and without money, he had led a precarious existence, and at last had been forced to become a fisherman.

The death of his loved wife, when their only child, Bessie, was a wee thing, nearly broke the exile's heart, and it was to bring that little girl up with every comfort that Juan Gito had just stepped out of the path of rectitude and become the agent of a band of smugglers, taking their goods to a market for them.

A pirate he had never been, but his honor blunted by association, gold became his god, and he soon formed a league with Forrester, the Freebooter, whose life he saved on one occasion, and disposed of his ill-gotten treasures to buyers in New Orleans, Pensacola and Mobile, as he found markets for them.

At last he had been found out by the very one for whom he sinned, for it was to leave Bessie a fortune that he did sin, and the mask of honor had been torn from his face by his own child.

The rumors regarding him he had laughed at to her, and she did not believe them; but caught upon the deck of the Skeleton Schooner with arms in his hands, what excuse had he to offer?

Thus it was, almost broken-hearted, crushed, humbled in spirit, he left the Skeleton Schooner, cursing his own ill-fortune, and blaming Percy Wyndham for allowing him to go free, when he could have had him strung up to the yard-arm.

Mechanically he went to where his little sail-boat was moored along the bank, and then to his surprise and alarm beheld it some distance out upon the water and a man upon its deck.

The sluggish current of the lagoon hardly moved it along, and slipping into the water he struck out for it with noiseless but strong stroke.

As he swam he saw that the person on board was poling the craft down the lagoon, keeping close in under the shadows and making every effort to get away from the vicinity of the pirate schooner.

As the current was slow and no wind was felt close inshore, the craft was moving at a pace which enabled Juan Gito to soon overhaul it.

Who the one was that had stolen his boat, Juan had no means of knowing, but he naturally suspected that it was some one of the crew of the pirate vessel that had managed to escape.

He dared not call out to him, for the schooner and sloop were not a hundred feet away, so he swam on and soon grasped the rudder-post.

The man on the little lugger had gone forward to clear the mast from an overhanging limb which had checked its progress, and Juan Gito managed to reach the deck and get a footing before he returned.

Then one good look at him was sufficient,

for he recognized even in the darkness the stately form of Captain Forrester.

"Ahoy, captain! which way with a messmate's lugger?" he asked, in a loud whisper.

Frank Forrester had just cleared the mast from the drooping branch when he heard the voice, and with the bound of a panther he was upon the fisherman, a knife, hastily drawn, in his upraised hand.

"Hold! I am Juan Gito," cried the Spaniard just in time to avoid the savage blow meant for him.

"Ha! I knew you not, good Juan.

"Are you alone?" and Forrester spoke with the utmost coolness.

"Yes, I escaped."

"And your daughter was the traitor."

"Have a care, Captain Forrester, how you speak of my child, for she was no traitor."

"She neither knew you or I as we are, and when that craft came for me to pilot them here, she offered her services, believing she was doing right."

"I beg pardon, Juan, but I feel a little bitter, naturally, after losing my vessel."

"All right, captain, but you saved your life, and that is more than half the battle."

"Yes, far more, for I will soon be afloat again, and on a vessel as fine as is the Skeleton Schooner, and now that the mask is torn off, let my foes look out."

"By Heaven! Juan Gito, I received a fright to-night that set my nerves in a tremor in a way I did not believe possible, for, on board that craft was Miss Mabel Mortimer, whom all believed dead."

"No!" exclaimed Juan Gito, in great surprise.

"It is a fact, for she boarded with your daughter, and it was believed she was lost in a blow the night she disappeared, as you know."

The words of the captain seemed to impress the fisherman deeply, and he became lost in thought, while, having gotten out his sweeps as they talked, he worked on in silence.

It was a long, hard pull to the mouth of the Black Lagoon; but at last the little lugger felt the Gulf breeze, and began to glide through the water.

"Well, Juan, which way?" asked the pirate leader, as he laid aside his sweep, and joined the fisherman, who had now taken the helm.

"Where would you go, Captain Forrester, for it is most urgent to first secure your safety?" answered Gito.

"To Mobile, good Juan."

"Run me into that port, and I will pay you well."

"I want not your pay for a service like that, *señor*," bluntly said the Spaniard.

"Well, I thank you, Juan, and will not forget you; so make Mobile with all dispatch, and then I will find means to start out anew in my career."

And toward Mobile the little lugger was headed, and, at a slapping pace, as though glad to escape from its foes, it went dashing along on its way.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

JUAN GITO'S RETURN HOME.

BESSIE GITO had begun to feel more anxious regarding the safety of her father, for three days had passed away, since her return from the Black Lagoon, and still he had not appeared.

She knew he had left home in his favorite stanch sail-boat, when he had professed to be going to Mobile, and she had looked for that little craft most closely along the bank, and near the Skeleton Schooner, and had not been able to find it, so she concluded that her father had escaped by that means.

Yet the weather had been good since then, and she could see no reason for his not coming home, other than that he might fear it had in some way leaked out that he had been fighting with the pirates, and officers of the law might be lying in wait for him.

"But he should know I would be on hand to warn him," she said to herself.

Then it flashed into her mind that perhaps he was ashamed to face her, after her discovery that he was other than what she had supposed.

Still she loved him most devotedly, and longed for his coming, for she was sad and imbibited by all that had occurred, and she needed him near her.

She had not seen Mark Mortimer since his last cruel visit, nor did she wish to, unless he came to assert his manhood and confess to her

he had wronged her, but was more than willing to atone for it.

Each afternoon she was wont to sit on the rustic seat that commanded a fine view of the waters up and down the coast, and, as at last she was about to turn away, again disappointed, in the gathering sunlight she caught sight of a sail.

Leveling her glass at it, she cried eagerly:

"It is the lugger! my father comes!"

To the cottage then she went, and setting to work soon had a tempting supper prepared, the cloth laid, and all ready for the coming of her father.

She meant not to reproach him, she meant not to speak of the past, for she felt that he had had punishment enough; but some day she would beg a promise of him that he would forever bury the evil past.

At last, when all was ready she started to go out and see if it was possible that she had been mistaken.

"Bessie!"

The word was uttered in a most plaintive tone, and the door was darkened by the form of her father.

He stood there like one who dared not enter, and his eyes seemed riveted upon her face.

"Father!"

With the single word she bounded toward him and threw her arms about his neck.

"You forgive me then, Bessie?"

"You do not hate me?" he murmured.

"No, father, I could never hate you, and I forgive you," she cried, and then the strong man broke down, and, for the first time since his boyhood, shed bitter, scalding tears.

She waited until his deep emotion was over, and then led him to his seat at the table, and served the supper, while she chatted cheerily the while.

"No news of any kind, Bessie?" he asked after awhile.

"None, father, and yet I did hear, from a negro from The Everglades, who was fishing off the point, that Mr. Mortimer intended calling out Mr. Wyndham."

"He had better not, for that youth is no man to trifle with."

"I never saw a man handle a sword as he can, and his aim is sure death every time he touches a trigger."

"Why, if it had not been for him, the crew of the schooner would never have been beaten."

Bessie made no reply, and her father seemed to feel that he had touched upon a sore subject, so extricated himself quickly by saying:

"Bessie, I wish to explain to you my presence there."

"I am not as bad as you think me, for I am no pirate; but I have dodged the Revenue, and sold goods for Forrester, and it was to see him on business that I went to his vessel, when en route to Mobile."

"When there, and about to depart, the sloop came up and attacked the schooner, and Forrester asked me not to desert him, and hence I fought by his side."

"I am glad to know this much at least, father; but did you know that Captain Forrester escaped?"

"Did he?" he asked evasively.

"Do you not know it, father?"

"I confess it, Bessie, I do."

"He was on my lugger, and I swam out and boarded her, to find him there."

"And where is he now?"

"I left him in Mobile."

"Father, do you intend to still remain the tool of that man, for you are nothing more?"

"Bessie, our paths in life have divided forever, so say no more about it."

"You know just what I am, and I will atone for the past, and beg you to forgive and forget."

"Now let us talk of yourself, for to-morrow I go to see the young master of The Everglades, and know why he has acted with dis-honor toward you."

"You will not harm him, father?" said Bessie anxiously.

"Oh no, but I think I will be able to convince him that he has done wrong."

"Now let us retire, for I have had no rest, as I have had a breast too full of sorrow at your discovery of my sins."

"But, Bessie, you are good and true, and your prayers will be answered, so I beg you to pray for that noble young man, Percy Wyndham, whom, would to God, you had learned to love instead of that scoundrel, Mark Mortimer,

for villain he has shown himself in his conduct to you," and Juan Gito sought his room to retire, and Bessie heard not his muttered words:

"Mark Mortimer shall marry her, or my knife will find his heart."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A PROPOSED CRUISE.

THE morning following his return to Lakelands, Percy Wyndham arose quite early, and after breakfast called a council of Uncle Toby, old Aunt Nance and Phoebe.

From them he heard in turn all that had transpired during his absence, and tried to glean all that would aid him in the search for his mother.

One thing gave him great relief, and that was the circumstance of her having carried with her her jewels, some clothing and what money she had, for this did not point toward suicide, as he had at first feared was the case.

An investigation by Aunt Nance revealed the fact of her having gone quite well supplied with clothing, and Percy well knew that his mother's jewels were of great value, and that she had a well-filled purse at the time he left her, with no means of spending any since. Could she have gone back to Mexico, he wondered?

If not, where had she gone?

The idea that she had returned to her old girlhood home in Mexico, took the firmest hold upon his mind, and he determined to at once store his yacht, the Jack-o'-lantern, for a cruise to that coast.

To get there he knew she would have to go to New Orleans or Mobile, and take a packet to Vera Cruz; but that would be quite easy of accomplishment by going into the interior and taking the stage to either of those cities, or by going out in a skiff and hauling one of the coasters that plied along shore.

Uncle Toby had gone to the village, and by discreet inquiries at the stage office, discovered that no person, answering the description of his mistress, had taken a passage in any coach of late, so the coastwise vessels must have been her way of escape.

"Uncle Toby, tell Caleb to come to me," said Percy.

Now Caleb was a kind of head man in the place, for he had been the fisherman of the plantation for years, and no better sailor lived than he had shown himself to be.

Captain Wyndham had said frequently that he would make a good captain of a vessel, and did not hesitate to trust him wholly with the management of his yacht.

A tall, broad-shouldered man, with bold, honest but black face, Caleb appeared before his master, dressed in a suit of spotless duck.

"Caleb, how many men can you muster from the place who are good seamen?" asked Percy.

"Just twenty, sah, 'sides myself," was the prompt reply.

"You can rely upon them all?"

"Yes, massa."

"Would they be willing to fight for me, Caleb?"

"Jist try 'em, massa, and you find they fight like hyenas."

"I am glad to hear it, for I intend to make a cruise, and we may have to run into some dangers, where we have to fight our way out."

"Yes, massa."

"How long will it take to get the men together, and virtual the yacht for a cruise?"

"The Glide, massa?"

"No, the Jack-o'-lantern."

"Waal, sah, say about how many goes along?"

"You and your twenty sailors."

"For say how long a time, massa?"

"We will call it a month's cruise."

"Waal, sah, you know niggers love hominy, hoe-cake and bacon, and the store-house am full of dem."

"Yes."

"Waal, sah, I kin git all on board and ready by dinner."

"That will be ample time, for I don't care to sail before night, and I wish no one to know where I am going."

"Now go on board and get the Lantern ship-shape, and if you need extra spars and sails take them from the Glide and other yachts."

"Yes, sah, I'll have her trim as a Creole's foot and all ready, sah, afore sunset," and Caleb took his departure.

Percy then gave his orders to Uncle Toby, as to what he needed to have sent on board for himself, in the way of stores and clothing, and then sauntered forth for a walk about the plantation.

A short stroll upon the lawn, a walk among the flower-gardens, and then his steps led him by a path leading to the forest beyond, where lay the Magnolia Arbor, and still further on the burying-ground of Lakelands.

CHAPTER XL.

THE MEETING AT THE GRAVE.

PERCY WYNDHAM had not progressed very far before he came suddenly upon three negroes, seemingly flying with terror.

Their faces were of that ashen hue that the negro complexion assumes under excitement, and they were flying along at their utmost speed.

Seeing their master, for they belonged to the Lakelands plantation, they came to a halt, but were evidently greatly terrified.

"Bal! Binney! Aaron! what on earth ails you?" asked Percy, sternly.

"Massa, oh, massa!" gasped one, while the two others were unable to speak.

Percy glanced in the direction from whence they had come, and saw neither panther, bear nor wolf, which the woods sometimes contained, to frighten them, nor was any one in sight that could have pursued them.

"Speak, Aaron, as you seem to have a little breath left, and tell me what is the matter."

"The ghost?" gasped Aaron.

"What ghost?"

"The Ghost of de Lagoon, massa."

Percy had been told by Uncle Toby of the strange apparition seen upon the lagoon banks, and how Mark Mortimer had endeavored to discover it, and though doing so, had failed to capture the strange and ghostly creature.

He also knew that the ghost was wont to appear in broad daylight too, though it had also been seen by night, and near both the plantations of Lakelands and The Everglades.

In those early days superstition ran rampant, and there were intelligent and educated people who were silly enough to believe as thoroughly in spooks, goblins, ghosts, witches, and fairies as the ignorant of to day do, so it was no wonder that Percy Wyndham, as brave as a lion, was yet impressed by the strange stories he had heard, and the really painful terror of the negroes.

"Nonsense, Aaron, a ghost don't walk by daylight," he said.

"Marsa, dat ghost am a deception to de rule, sah, for it do walk in daytime, for I seen it, sah, Ball he seen it, an' Binney done see it, too."

"What did it look like?"

"Look like hit were dead, sah!"

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"Bof, sah, for it had long close on, but look funny in de face."

"Well, Aaron, you can go on to the quarter, and I will see if I can find your ghost."

"Don't do it, marsa, don't do it, sah," cried the three negroes in a chorus, for the other two had found their voices now.

But Percy smiled, and walked on, while the negroes stood gazing in wonder and admiration of him for daring to face one from Ghostland.

Arriving at Magnolia Arbor Percy Wyndham paused, while over him swept a torrent of thought of what had happened since there.

As though weighted down with his sorrows, he quickly passed on from the place, and wended his way further into the dense forest to the burying-ground where slept two generations of his name.

He looked eagerly about him for some sign of the Ghost of the Lagoon, but nowhere was it visible.

What it was he could not imagine, and yet it must be something, for too many had seen the ghastly being to doubt wholly the existence of a ghastly form prowling the forests and rowing upon the waters of the lagoon.

At last he reached the little burying-ground, and leaping over the brick wall that inclosed it, stood with uncovered head among the dead. His quick eye detected marks here and there recently made, and yet they were too faint to discern what the one who made them might be, whether one of the field-hands from the plantation or some planter hunters who happened to pass near.

The grave of his father had flowers upon it, which had evidently been gathered in the garden of Lakelands; but then the negroes had all

loved their dead master, and some of them, doubtless, had thus shown their respect for his memory.

Standing by his father's grave, with head uncovered and eyes downcast, he allowed memory to have full sway, and sorrow most poignant swelled up from his heart.

And then into his ears seemed to be whispered the words:

"Yet unavenged! yet unavenged!"

With a little imprecation, because he could not drown the whisper, he turned away, and beheld, not twenty feet from him, and standing in the shadow of a large magnolia, a form robed in pure white.

In spite of his nerve he slightly started, for the first thought that rushed through his mind was that he was face to face with the Ghost of the Lagoon.

But a closer glance showed him that it was Mabel Mortimer.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE WARNING.

QUICKLY springing over the wall, Percy Wyndham advanced toward the maiden, while his face flushed, and hers was pale.

In an embarrassed way she said, as he came up to her, meeting his look in a shy way:

"Pardon me, Mr. Wyndham, for daring to come to this spot, sacred to your dearest memories, and where one of my name can but bring up feelings of bitterness; but I have wanted to see you upon an affair of vital importance."

"I am wholly at the service of Miss Mortimer, wherever she may be pleased to meet me," answered Percy in a quiet tone.

"You are ever good to me, sir; but I have watched anxiously for your return home, and had a note written to send you by my maid.

"But she is closely watched, and I saw you, with my glass from my window, come in this direction, and felt that I should find you here."

"In what way can I serve Miss Mortimer?" asked Percy in a low tone.

"You have already served me so deeply, Mr. Wyndham, the debt of gratitude must ever remain unpaid; but, as a slight recompence, I have sought you here to say that you are in danger of trouble."

"I am always in trouble now, Miss Mortimer," he said sadly.

"Yes, and bravely face your misfortunes, Mr. Wyndham, but this time it is my brother who would plot against you."

"I do not fear Mr. Mortimer," was the very calm reply.

"You do not fear an open foe, I know, but I warn you, that, though he is my brother, he will strike at your back."

Percy looked surprised, and said:

"Surely a Mortimer cannot turn into an assassin."

She flushed at being misunderstood, and quickly replied:

"No, no, no; I do not mean that Mark could be so vile as that; but he means to get you into trouble because you made Duke your prisoner one night."

"You know I refer to my late father's confidential slave?"

"Yes, the one who attacked me after my duel with your father, and I was forced to shoot," was Percy's cool remark.

"The same, and he is now the devoted slave and instrument to aid my brother in anything he may undertake."

"What charge does your brother make against me, Miss Mortimer?"

"I shame to say it, sir; but I believe it is his intention to have you arrested for negro-stealing."

"By Heaven! that is just my intention!"

Both Percy Wyndham and Mabel Mortimer started as the words broke on their ear, and then they beheld suddenly step out from behind the thick wall of the burying-ground the tall form of Mark Mortimer, and he was not alone, for another accompanied him.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE DEATH AMONG THE MAGNOLIAS.

MARK MORTIMER had evidently heard the warning his sister had given Percy Wyndham; but that he had been on the spot more than a moment they both knew could not be, as Mabel had come around the burying-ground upon her way to meet the young planter.

Mark Mortimer was livid with suppressed rage and excitement, and wore on his face a triumphant, sneering smile.

His companion was a man of forty, with a cruel, sinister, low face, and Percy Wyndham recognized him as an officer of the law, who dwelt some few leagues away.

A remorseless wretch, cruel to all in his power, a grinder down of the poor, and a sycophant to the rich he knew him to be, while he was just such a man as Mark Mortimer would want for a tool.

"Well, sir, you have but demeaned yourself the more by playing the spy and eavesdropper," said Mabel, scathingly, as her brother approached, closely followed by the officer.

As for Percy he held his ground, calm, dignified, yet defiant; but in his eyes there played a dangerous light.

"Mabel, I will have no abuse from you."

"Because this man has accidentally dragged you out of danger, you have seen fit to forget that his hands are red with the blood of our father, and treat him with a kindness that is unworthy of you," said Mark Mortimer in a vicious tone.

Mark Mortimer never flinched, but remained silent, while Mabel answered:

"He has saved my life, and gladly in return do I warn him that you would strike at his honor."

"My father fell by his hand, yes, and yet that same hand has saved my life more than once, while you sought to wipe out one death by taking the life of one who had not wronged you."

"Go, sir, you and that creature, for I would be alone with Mr. Wyndham."

She was beautiful, nay grand in her anger and scorn, and her brother seemed slightly cowed before her, while the officer of the law winced at the very appropriate title of creature which she had bestowed upon him.

Then, for the first time, Percy Wyndham spoke, and in his calm way he said:

"As Mr. Mortimer seems to have come here to seek me, Miss Mortimer, perhaps it would be best for you to retire, for I will frankly say that I am on my own ground, within twenty feet of my father's grave, a grave filled by the wanton act of your brother, and here I shall remain until he and his hireling depart."

Mabel seemed deeply pained, for she felt some deep tragedy was imminent.

Go she would not, for she was determined that no harm should come to Percy Wyndham, and in her presence she was assured that he would never raise hand against her brother, whatever he might do did she depart.

As for Mark Mortimer he determined to at once shift the responsibility upon the shoulders of his hireling, and answered with a sneer:

"I faced your father, Percy Wyndham, in a duel, for no man could say but that he was all honor."

"But, with the charge against you that I make, and can prove, and which this officer is here to arrest you for, you may understand, that I cannot grant you a meeting."

"There, Dustan! there stands your man, so arrest him."

The officer thus called on drew two objects from his pocket and took a step toward Percy.

One of these objects was a pistol, the other a pair of handcuffs.

"Back, sir, if your advance means my arrest," said Percy sternly.

"It does mean it, my fine young man, and your haughty airs and angry eyes bain't going to scare me off the line of duty," was the bold reply of the officer.

"With what am I charged?" demanded Percy, dropping his hand like lightning upon a pistol butt beneath his loose sailor jacket.

"There is a charge ag'in' you, Mr. Percy Wyndham, that will so aggravate the boys of the village, when I tells it to them, that you'll get swung up to a tree before you ever reach trial," remarked the officer, whom Mark Mortimer had addressed as Dustan.

"Ha! that is your game, to hang me by mob-law and try me afterward?" cried Percy, and there was a dangerous ring to his tones.

"My duty is to arrest you, and I intends to do it, so no airs," was the sullen reply.

"Do your duty, Dustan, for he only came home last night, and will be gone to-night," cried Mark Mortimer.

"Back, or you'll rue it," said Percy.

"Don't threaten me, young man, for I'll not stand it," and the officer advanced nearer.

"I do threaten you, and warn you off my land this instant."

"You can't scare me."

"Back, or take the consequences."

"Ah! that's your game," and the officer raised his pistol, while Mark Mortimer cried:

"Do your duty, Dustan!"

He may have thought it his duty to level his pistol and fire; but he made a sad mistake, for ere the echo of the two pistols had ceased to rumble through the forest he lay dead in his tracks.

CHAPTER XLIII.

MORE THAN WATCHED.

"MURDERER! I arrest—"

"Hold! I do not wish to kill you, Mark Mortimer, and simply on your sister's account; but I will do so, if you do not drop the weapon you have your hand on in your bosom."

Mark Mortimer had not been quick enough. His hireling lay dead at his feet, a bullet in the center of his forehead, while the shot meant for Percy Wyndham had missed its mark.

He knew he was at the mercy of the man he had expected to get into his power, and to escape from it, he said:

"I am at your mercy, sir, but I shall ere nightfall again face you, and upon more equal terms."

"Mr. Mortimer, I have sought no quarrel with you, nor do I wish one."

"For his crimes toward me and mine your father was punished by death, and you are the one that laid the vendetta between our names by killing my father."

"If you drive me to it, sir, I shall face you in the *duello*; but let the dead past bury its dead, and open enmity between us end here, no matter what we may feel in private."

Percy Wyndham spoke imperiously, and with a dignity that was surprising in one so young.

Every word he uttered went to the heart of Mabel, but failed to touch the feelings of her brother.

Mark Mortimer hated his enemy from various reasons, and he wished him dead, and he was more than willing to risk his own life to secure that end.

He was ambitious, grasping, and feared that his sister was forgetting herself in her love, and might marry the young master of Lakelands, though their hands must be united across graves in which lay their fathers.

He wanted The Everglades all to himself, therefore must take big chances to get it.

"Mr. Wyndham, I accept no compromise, for it shall be war to the bitter end between us," he said savagely.

"As you please, sir, I am wholly at your service."

"Then let us here end this bad blood between us."

"In the presence of your sister, sir?" and Percy looked his amazement.

"I should not think you would object to such a settlement, when you killed my father in the presence of your mother."

Percy bit his lip at this direct shot, but answered:

"We have no seconds, Mr. Mortimer."

"Nor had you, sir, in your duel with my father."

Stung to the quick, Percy replied:

"As you please, sir, if Miss Mortimer consents."

Mabel had stood calmly by, white as a sheet, but most attentively watching every movement and hearing every word.

She now knew that her brother had plotted to disgrace Percy, by having him arrested upon the plea of kidnapping Duke.

The better class would hoot at the idea of a Wyndham so dishonoring himself, but the masses would be easily led to take the law in their hands, and she did not feel that her brother was any too good, in his hatred for Percy, to take care to have the train already laid that would carry his enemy to destruction.

This having failed, by the prompt killing of the officer by Percy, she saw clearly that Mark intended to force a duel, to gain his end.

When Percy said he would meet her brother with her consent, she answered with stern decision:

"Miss Mortimer decidedly refuses to give her consent."

"Then I shall let the law take its course with Mr. Wyndham upon the charges of kidnapping my slave, and murder of an officer."

"Mabel, you accompany me to the house," and he stepped toward the maiden.

But the lion in her nature was roused then, and springing back she cried in ringing tones:

"Mark Mortimer, bear me, and I mean every word, brother though you be of mine."

He looked at her in angry amazement, not knowing what was to come next, while she continued:

"That hireling of yours attacked Mr. Wyndham, and in self-defense he killed him, so make what excuse you care to for the death of the man, or toss his body into the lagoon to suit your humor, and let him be accounted for as one who disappeared mysteriously, for if you dare report to the authorities that he fell by the hand of Mr. Percy Wyndham, I will bring a charge against you that will hang you."

"Good God! Mabel are you mad?" he cried, alarmed at her manner and words.

"No, intensely sane, as you will discover."

"In the name of Heaven! what charge will you bring against me?" he cried with a sneer.

"That of piracy upon the high seas, that of being the ally of Forrester, the Freebooter."

"Now, sir, dare to carry this matter further and we will see who will be the sufferer."

"The charge of kidnapping a slave is nonsense, for Mr. Wyndham was on the track of a pirate, and captured Duke, your servant, carrying papers on board the yacht belonging to the pirate chief, who was your guest; so you see how easily that will fall through."

"As to killing that man, I, your sister, will swear that you brought him here to kill Mr. Wyndham, who acted in self-defense, and then I'll bring the accusation of piracy against you."

"Now, sir, do your worst, and we leave you here by the body of the man, whose death you brought on, to decide."

"Come, Mr. Wyndham, give me your arm far as Magnolia Arbor."

Percy offered his arm with courtly grace, and the two walked away together, leaving Mark Mortimer livid, trembling, astounded.

But they had barely passed out of sight, when they heard a heavy splash in the waters of the lagoon, and it told them that Mark Mortimer had taken a new course for his own good, and intended to cover up his own tracks as best he could for the present.

Arriving at Magnolia Arbor, Mabel stretched forth her hand in farewell, and said simply:

"Beware of my brother. Good by!" He bowed and the two parted, and several hours after, as she sat at her open window, she saw the Jack-o'-lantern gliding out of the harbor in the darkness, and watched her until she disappeared far out in the sea.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A HOT AND DARING CHASE.

THE rumor of the appearance of a ghost in the forests back of The Everglades and Lakelands, and of its also being seen upon the waters of the lagoon, created greater and greater excitement each day not only among the negro fraternity, but also with the whites.

There were a score or more of lordly plantation homes along the shores, and inland others of lesser pretensions, and everywhere ran the rumor of this Ghost of the Lagoon, until stories of the weird apparition were told among the cabins of the humble coast fishermen.

In this way it reached the ears of Bessie Gito, through her father bringing home the story.

Instantly that plucky maiden made up her mind that she would like to see a ghost, and she waited one afternoon until her father had gone out deep-sea fishing, and then prepared herself for her trip.

She got her lightest skiff, best oars, and dressed herself in her rowing suit, and was ready, as soon as she took the precaution to put in her belt a pistol.

Getting into the skiff she rowed along the shore until she came to the mouth of the larger lagoon, into which numerous smaller bayous, or lagoons, emptied their sluggish waters.

She knew the net-work formed by the different streams as well as any one on the coast, and held on her way with a steady, strong stroke, past the burying-ground of the Mortimers, and then on another bayou to the last resting place of the Wyndhams.

Here she hid her skiff in the foliage of the overhanging trees and started for the little walled-in graveyard.

On her way her foot struck something that gave a ringing sound, and she picked up a bundle of keys, and near it beheld a piece of paper.

It was an unsealed letter, the seal having

been broken, and was addressed to Daniel Dustan.

She knew the handwriting at a glance.

It was that of Mark Mortimer, and without hesitation she read the contents.

It was crumpled, dated the day before, and simply read:

"Come over and spend a few days and I can take care of you quietly."

"Then we can catch him, for he returned last night, and in the yacht he captured."

"Once you arrest him, I will take care of him until you can go on ahead and collect and excite a crowd to readily take him off our hands, and you shall have your reward."

M. M.

"P. S. Burn this as soon as read."

For a moment, after having twice read this precious missive, which the reader can more readily understand than could Bessie, having interpreted the meeting at the Lakelands graveyard, the maiden pandered deeply.

"This is Mark's handwriting; I should know it among a thousand letters as his, even did the initials not betray him."

"It is addressed to that cruel constable, Dan Dunstan, of the village, and who can it refer to but Mr. Percy Wyndham, who returned night before last, and this letter was dated yesterday."

"There seems as if there was some plot against him; but then he sailed last night in the Jack-o'-lantern, for he passed father offshore and hailed him, so he did not fall into trap."

"I will keep this letter and the keys," and thrusting them into her bosom, she went on toward the little graveyard.

As she reached the gate she suddenly saw a white object disappear behind the wall.

Instantly she ran there, but it was too high for her to look over, and going back to the gate she passed through and darted around on the outside.

Arriving at the corner, that gave her a view of that side, she beheld nothing, but turning, saw, a hundred yards off, a white form running swiftly away.

To follow it was Bessie's first thought, for she was certain she had seen the Ghost of the Lagoon; but if she did so, how would she cross the bayou, toward which the weird form was making?

She gazed after it, and saw that it could only cross by a boat, or swimming, and there must be its boat.

She could not make out what it was, though she could see that it was a human form clad in snowy white, with a long robe and full sleeves.

Instantly she started for her boat, sprung in, and settling herself well in her seat, pulled with a rapid, strong stroke, which had carried a much heavier skiff through many a rough sea.

Bessie knew well what she could do with the oars, and was not fearful of not being able to overtake the ghost, should she take to the water, for she had pulled even with Jean Jewett, and he was noted as a rapid oarsman, while her powers of endurance had been put to the test on many an occasion, and never failed her.

Once out from the shadows of the trees that lined the banks, and she turned to look up the lagoon.

Nothing was visible to the eye at first, but close scrutiny soon revealed a small, white skiff stealing along under the shadows of the festooned moss that hung from the trees, and far out over the waters.

"It is the ghost, and it has taken to its boat."

"Now for it, for I will solve this mystery that makes brave men tremble," she murmured to herself.

Instantly her light blades dropped into the water, and up the stream darted her light skiff.

A row of several hundred feet, and again she looked around her to see that the weird creature had become aware of her pursuit, and having left the banks was rowing in mid-lagoon, with swift, strong stroke, where the trees upon either side did not interfere with her oars.

The lagoon was not more than seventy feet wide from bank to bank, and as the branches of the trees on each side took up some twelve feet of this, it gave the rowers but a narrow space in mid-stream for their oars.

Bessie rowed at a disadvantage, for the ghost could see her, and she had to turn to look ahead at the chase; but she soon saw that she pulled a faster pace than the ghostly arms could propel her skiff, and was gaining.

She knew that above her a mile was a network of bayous, and did she not draw near the chase before arriving there, she might be thrown off the scent, and this she bent her every energy to accomplish.

As they went in, the bayou slightly narrowed, and soon there were but a few feet on either side between the trees that drooped in the water and her oar-blades, and she had to row with the greatest of care not to foul these obstacles.

At last the ghost reached the first lagoon branching off from the one in which they were rowing, and Bessie turned her head just in time to see her dart into it.

She knew that it was not thirty feet wide, and its banks being also fringed with foliage, that it would be impossible to use her oars there.

Reaching the entrance to it, she gave one long, tremendous pull, which shot the skiff into it, and then, ere its headway was lost, had shipped her oars and had seized a wide-bladed paddle, which she fortunately had provided herself with.

This gave her an advantage, as she was enabled to have her face in the direction in which she was going, though her speed was diminished; but she knew that the ghost's locomotion in the narrow lagoon had to be the same.

It was but a short while before she discovered only a few lengths ahead the object of her pursuit.

It was standing up in the skiff, sending the light craft along by the vigorous use of one of the oars, which served the place of a paddle, and did certainly look weird and spectral-like in its long flowing robe.

As Bessie came in sight it seemed to start, for there seemed to have been a hope in its mind that she would be checked at the narrow bayou.

But it kept on for a short distance, and then ran in under the trees, and springing ashore, darted away on foot.

Bessie was not to be thwarted, however, and followed suit, gathering her skirts around her for a rapid run, and soon found she was fleet on foot than the ghost.

It was now sunset, and in the dense shadows of the forest it appeared to be a dim twilight; but Bessie saw the white form flitting ahead of her, and sped on.

Suddenly it stopped, and the next instant Bessie found herself face to face with the Ghost of the Lagoon.

CHAPTER XLV.

SOLVING A MYSTERY.

"WHY have you followed me?"

Such was the question of the alleged Ghost of the Lagoon to Bessie Gito, as she suddenly stopped, when confronted by the strange being she had pursued so remorselessly.

The "ghost" stood in front of a small bark cabin, built in the midst of a group of immense trees, and elevated a few feet above the ground.

The roof and sides were of bark, the flooring of small saplings, and it was carpeted with moss.

Inside Bessie could discern a few clothes, and outside was a silver tea urn and a few dishes, while against a tree stood a small gun, and a fire was dying out near by.

All this Bessie saw at a glance, and then turned her gaze more particularly upon the occupant of this lonely and rustic home.

It was a woman, clad in white, which contact with the forest had sadly soiled.

Her head was enveloped in a white silk bandana, worn low over the forehead, and thus concealing her hair, while a collar of fine lace encircled the neck and hid the chin and half of the lower features, making it almost impossible to recognize her.

There was that about the woman that commanded respect, and when her earnest, beautiful eyes turned upon Bessie, she flushed with shame at having been rude in her pursuit of her.

But she was determined now to carry out her purpose and solve the mystery, and in reply to the query, delivered in a low, sad, reproachful tone, she replied softly:

"I meant you no harm, madam; but you have excited the whole coast with your mysterious dwelling in this forest, and I determined to solve the mystery of the Ghost of the Lagoon."

"They call me a ghost, do they?" said the woman, with a sad smile.

"Yes, you are so spoken of on shore and inland."

"It is better so, and I confess to dressing as I do to keep off curious negroes, who are often wont to pass through these forests."

"But you must leave me now, and promise not to reveal who or what I am."

"I do not know who you are, or your motive for hiding here, for this is no place for a lady, as you appear to be, and I beg you to come home with me."

"You are Bessie Gito?"

"Yes, madam."

"They call you the Lady of the Lagoon?"

"Yes, madam."

"You are a plucky girl, and it is said of you that you have a noble heart."

"I am one in misfortune, and I prefer this life in the forest to dwelling in a prison, at least until I can find a way to escape to a different existence, which will only be after I have performed a certain duty I owe the dead."

"You speak of a prison. You do not look like one who has done wrong," said Bessie, in a kindly tone.

"Nor have I."

"Then why would you be put in prison?"

"It is a prison to me, for they keep me behind bolts and bars, because I am mad."

"Mad! you mad?" exclaimed Bessie in surprise and pity.

"So I am told," was the calm reply.

Bessie knew not what to say, so asked:

"How is it that you know me?"

"I have often seen you on the water in your surf-skiff, and sail-boat."

"Who are you, may I ask?"

"My name is Nina Wyndham," was the low reply.

"Holy Mother!" burst from Bessie's lips in amazement.

Now she knew well who the poor woman was, though she believed her to be confined in her own home, a maniac.

She had not heard of her escape, and what did it mean, that Mrs. Wyndham was hiding, like a hunted deer in the depths of the forest, within a league of her own elegant mansion?

How had this beautiful woman nurtured in luxury, subsisted in this dense swamp, alone, and suffering?

At once her mind was made up, and she said firmly:

"Mrs. Wyndham, I know of the sad cause that made them say you were mad, and it was a fearful blow upon you, and from my heart I pity you."

"I believed, as others do, that you were in your own home, bowed down in grief, more than suffering with brain trouble, and now that you have come here to hide, I will frankly tell you that here you cannot remain."

"No, no, I will not go from here," cried the unfortunate woman in a half frightened way.

"Yes, you must go with me to my home, and I will take care of you."

"Come, no one dwells there excepting my father and myself, and no one else will see you, or shall know of your presence there, while I will care for you as kindly as though you were my own mother."

"You will not let them take me from you?" she asked, eager to go, yet fearful of remaining.

"No, no one shall see you, or harm you."

"God bless you," and the proud woman dropped her head upon Bessie's shoulder and sobbed bitterly, the first tears she had shed for many a long day, for her heart had seemed incased in an adamantine shell, through which no tear could force its way.

Bessie soothed her with kind words, gained her entire confidence, and half an hour after her arrival at the cabin, departed for Cliff Cottage.

It was dark now, and Mrs. Wyndham sat in Bessie's boat, for the maiden would have it so, and she rowed, towing the skiff of the unfortunate woman, and in it, the treasures she had in her little bark cabin, where, since the day after her escape she had dwelt, procuring food by hunting and fishing, and preferring that drear existence in perfect freedom, to being locked up in a palace as a madwoman.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MARK MORTIMER FORMS ANOTHER PLOT.

"By Heaven! that girl over-matches me, and yet I am the master, as I supposed, after the death of my father."

Such was the remark of Mark Mortimer, after the departure of his sister from the burying-ground, leaning upon the arm of Percy Wyndham, his worst enemy.

"Can that be my dove-like little sister, whom father called the Angel of The Everglades?"

"Well, something has made her show what she is, and I must be careful."

"By the cross! but she threatened to denounce me as a pirate, and prove it, too."

"It would be hard to prove, I reckon, for I did not know Forrester to be as black as that Percy Wyndham has proven him, though I did suspect him of being a smuggler, close as he kept things from me."

"But then if she said I was a pirate, why, pirate the world would have me, and I'd dance a jig from the yard-arm of an American vessel sure as sin."

"That I could not afford, for there is work ahead of me, so I yielded, Mabel triumphed, Wyndham sneered, and here I am left on the field to bury the dead, or account for being found with a corpse as best I can."

"Dustan, your aim was bad, and he was cool and struck you square in the forehead, and thus my plot is ended against the master of Lakelands, whose capture of the Skeleton Schooner is creating such a furore."

"Well, digging is tiresome work, so I'll give you a sailor's burial, Dustan, and throw you into the sea, or rather the lagoon, and then you'll drift seaward before long."

He bent over the body as he spoke, and ran his hand through the pockets with the utmost coolness, transferring to his own what he seemed to care for.

Then it was he dropped the keys and letter which Bessie had found, and the dropping of which escaped his notice.

Raising the body in his strong arms, he walked to the edge of the lagoon with it, and hurled it out from him with all his might.

With a heavy splash it fell into the stream and sunk from sight.

Until the last ripple had died away, Mark Mortimer stood with the utmost coolness gazing upon the spot, and then turned away, and, switching the bushes with his cane, walked up to the Lakelands graveyard.

With a revengeful, sinister smile upon his handsome face, he stood gazing down at the graves, and let his eyes rest carelessly upon the one in which slept Captain Percy Wyndham, whom his hand had slain.

A light laugh broke from his lips as he turned away and wended his steps homeward.

Going to the library, his favorite room, he paced to and fro in deep thought, his brow clouded and his lips compressed.

At last he communed aloud, as was his wont when deeply moved.

"Percy Wyndham must die, that is certain, but he is too dead a shot for me to take the chances with him."

"I have no equal as a swordsman, now father is dead, for I even disarmed Forrester, so I shall have to force a challenge from him and choose swords, for if I challenge he will select pistols, and it is said he cannot miss, and I think I have had cause to know about his deadly aim, for the major was the best I ever saw, and he fell before him in their duel, while Dustan was knocked over with an ease I never saw equaled."

"Let me see, I'll watch my opportunity and when he goes to New Orleans follow him, and by a public insult force him to challenge me, and swords will be my weapon, and his heart the object of my ambition."

"But I must take Duke with me, for that fellow is getting to be a most useful piece of furniture to me now."

He touched a bell and soon after Duke made his appearance, greatly improved by his rest.

"Well, master?"

"Keep an eye on Lakelands, and when Percy Wyndham sails for New Orleans let me know, and pack up ready to accompany me there."

"Yes, sir."

"Any news of the madwoman?"

"Mrs. Wyndham?"

"Yes, who else could I refer to?"

"No, master; but she must have gotten frightened that night and returned, or else—"

"Else what?"

"Got drowned, sir."

"Or committed suicide, which is more likely."

"I wish we could find out, Duke, for we

might be able to charge Wyndham with the murder of his mother."

"But what motive would he have, sir?" asked the astute negro.

"True, he is rich enough in his own name, and all she has goes to him."

"Well, well, I have another plan in view, and that is to fight him."

"Master, I know you are a good shot, sir, but Mr. Wyndham cannot miss; they say."

"I'll fight him with swords, and there I yield to no man," was the haughty reply.

"Yes, sir, you might kill him then, master, for you are a magnificent swordsman," answered Duke, who, in practice with his late master, Major Mortimer, had proven himself also a master with the weapon.

"I'll try him, Duke, and if I fail in killing him, I have another plot."

"Yes, sir," and by the affirmative Duke meant to ask the question:

"What is that plot, sir?"

"It is for you to kill him."

The negro's eyes glittered, as though he would be glad to take the affair off his master's hands.

Several hours after, Duke came into the library to report that the Jack-o'-lantern had sailed, and at once Mark Mortimer gave orders to get his own yacht in readiness, and before midnight he too set sail, to follow in the wake of his foe, greatly to the alarm of Mabel, who saw the departure of both vessels, and felt convinced that her brother was up to some other scheme to get rid of his enemy.

CHAPTER XLVII.

LYING IN WAIT.

It was Mark Mortimer's first appearance in New Orleans, after his duel with Captain Wyndham; in his so-called revenge for killing his father, and he was greeted by a certain number of his intimates with every demonstration of pleasure, and quite lionized for his most romantic deed, for it had become known how it was fought upon the water, with each duelist standing upon his own yacht.

Then, too, his well-known intimacy with Frank Forrester, who had since been proven the pirate Skimmer of the Seas, and commander of the famous craft, Skeleton Schooner, cast a certain halo over him in a romantic way, though no one for an instant suspected that he had not been also duped by the pretended gambler, as to his real character, as were others.

There was one thing that cut Mark Mortimer deeply, and that was to hear everywhere the name of Percy Wyndham—or rather *Captain* Percy Wyndham, as he was called, for his capture of the pirate vessel had caused people to transfer the title from his late father's name to him.

On all sides Percy's feat was spoken of with the highest praise, and Mark found that his hated foe was ever to rise up before him.

But Percy Wyndham had not put in an appearance at New Orleans, though the last seen of his yacht, the Jack-o'-lantern, as she dropped Mark Mortimer's vessel astern, was that she seemed to be heading for the lake harbor.

"He is off on a cruise somewhere, Duke, but will end up here, so I will wait," said Mark, more than willing to pass his time in the gay city, especially as he had the money—obtained from Forrester in payment for his consent for him to marry Mabel—to enable him to pay his debts, and to launch out again into a life of dissipation and gambling.

To his delight luck went in his favor, for he nightly won large sums, and took this turn of fortune's tide as a presentiment of what his intended meeting with Percy Wyndham would bring about.

Thus the days passed by, and several weeks followed, but still Percy Wyndham came not.

But luck still held on the side of Mark Mortimer, and he felt that, large winner as he was, he could afford to remain as long as he pleased in the city.

At last, after being there a month, he felt that he must return home, to see after affairs on the plantation, and what Mabel was about, and hence ordered Duke to be ready to start the following morning.

Going to the gambling hall to try his luck for the last time before his return, to his deep chagrin he lost on the first game.

A second game and he was a loser too, and so it went on until he had paid over half of his large winnings.

"Luck has turned against me, so I will play no more now," he said, deeply annoyed, and

rising from the table beheld, not ten paces from him, none other than Percy Wyndham, in conversation with the Port Commodore, with whom he had evidently strolled into the saloon.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

PERCY WYNDHAM MAKES A VISIT.

STRAIGHT for the shores of Mexico sailed the Jack-o'-lantern, her daring young master not hugging the coast, where he could run into some shallow inlet, or river, to escape a foe, but boldly putting out across deep water and heading for the seaport of Corpus Christi.*

Landing on the coast, at the desired point, to seek his mother's girlhood home, he visited the spot, and was not long in discovering that she had not returned to that locality.

But he did not give up the search, and went to different places, where he hoped to get tidings of her, but was forced to return to his yacht disappointed.

Setting sail for his home on the shores of the United States, he again dropped anchor in the little harbor in front of Lakelands, one pleasant afternoon just before sunset.

Old Toby had seen the yacht coming, and, with Nance and Phoebe, had gone down to the pier to welcome back the young master.

After greeting them in his kindly way, he said:

"Well, Toby, my voyage was without result."

"Oh, master, I was in hopes mistis was on board the yacht with you," answered the old negro, sadly.

"Then there is no news, uncle Toby, of my poor mother?"

"No, sah, not a word."

"Yes there is, Toby, you old forgetful," chimed in old Nance.

Percy saw that there was something to communicate, and asked anxiously:

"Well, Toby, what is it?"

"The Ghost has gone, sah!"

"What ghost?"

"The ghost of the Lagoon, sah."

"Ah yes, I remember."

"You say it has disappeared?"

"Yes, sah."

"Gone back to the quietude of its grave, doubtless?"

"Yes, sah."

"Master, old Toby hain't tolle yer all, sah, for you knows mistis's skiff what was missin' when she went away?" said old Nance, while Uncle Toby broke in with:

"Yes, yes; yer has got a good mem'ry, old 'ooman."

"Yes, Nance, what of the skiff?" eagerly asked Percy.

"It has been brought back, sah, and there it is," and the negress pointed to the little craft.

"Who brought it back, Toby?"

"I don't know, master, no more than I found it one morning right where you see it."

"That is strange, very strange."

"What have you to say, Phoebe, for I see that you wish to speak to me?" and Percy Wyndham turned to the handsome mulatress maid and favorite.

"I wished to say, master, that the fisherman, Juan Gito, and his daughter, have been over here a dozen times, sir, to see if you had returned."

"To see me?" asked Percy, in surprise.

"Yes, sir."

"A dozen times?"

"Yes, sir, the young lady has sailed over nine or ten times, and the fisherman twice."

"That is strange."

"And they always came at night, sir."

"At night?"

"Yes, sir; each time."

Percy made no reply, but could not but wonder why Juan Gito and his beautiful daughter had been so anxious to see him.

As soon as he had had his supper, as it was a pretty moonlight night, and he had a fair wind to and from Cliff Cottage, he determined to sail over there and see Juan Gito and Bessie, and discover what was wanted with him.

"Perhaps Gito has gotten himself into some trouble," he said, as an excuse for their visits, and he ordered Caleb to have his little cat-boat ready for him, and soon after he started for the home of the fisherman.

Long and earnestly he looked at the white walls of The Everglades villa as he went along by it, half a mile off-shore, and like a beacon

* Then Mexican territory.

of welcome home to him, burned the bright light in the room of Mabel Mortimer.

At last the cliff point came in sight, and rounding it, he ran into the little bay, sprung out upon the white sands and wended his way up to the Gito cottage, in which was the glimmer of a light through the open door.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

UP the hillside to the top of the cliff, went Percy Wyndham, and arriving there, he paused to survey the scene of beauty around him.

The scent of flowers came to his nostrils, the balmy autumn air blew against his cheek with a delicious coolness, the waves fell lazily upon the shore, and the waters were like a silver lake, beneath the radiance of the moon, while against the dark background of forest, nestled the little white cabin, with the lamp within casting a bright stream of light out through the open door.

For some moments he stood there, drinking in the scene of beauty, and then, with a sigh, he moved on toward the cabin.

As he approached he saw that some one was seated in one of the large rustic chairs which the ingenuity of Juan Gito had manufactured, and which he had placed upon either side of his door, on the little piazza.

A glance was sufficient to show him that it was not Juan, and as his approach was not observed, he coughed slightly to attract attention.

But the occupant never moved, and believing it to be Bessie, and asleep, he drew nearer.

A few steps brought him to the side of the occupant of the chair, and then he stopped suddenly, gazed in rapt attention upon the face, which was lighted up by the moonlight that shone directly upon it.

"My God! is it sleep—or death?" he fairly groaned, and the sound of his voice aroused the sleeper, and springing forward he knelt before her, burying his face in her lap, and crying fervently:

"Mother! thank God I have found you."

She had started at seeing him, but recognizing his form and voice, had retained her seat, and when he knelt at her feet, had quietly laid her hand upon his bared head, while she said, softly:

"Yes, Percy, my son, you have found me, but it is to make me suffer again by being imprisoned in my own home as a madwoman."

"No, no, mother, never again, never again," he cried, earnestly.

"Thank God for those words, my noble son, for back into my aching heart they bring joy," and her voice trembled with emotion!

"Mother, hear me!" he said, almost imperatively, as he arose to his feet and faced her.

"Well, Percy?"

"I know all of the sad story of the past, from your earliest girlhood, for I have just returned from Mexico, where your attorney told me all."

"Knowing what I do, I now understand that you, having married Major Mark Mortimer when you were a child, and being deceived by him, for he was already married to the woman whom he had caused to break with my father, I say, knowing this, I can understand well, why, when we came to Lakelands to live, and you discovered that the man you believed your husband, and mourned as dead, was alive and living near us, that you wished him dead."

"As my father had kept from you his early love for the woman that Major Mortimer had faithlessly won from him in his absence, and his duel with his base friend, so you, I know, guided by your uncle and guardian, took your maiden name, after the supposed death of Mortimer, and hid from my father the fact of your earlier marriage."

"When your attorney came to Lakelands upon business, as he told me, the dread secret had to come out, and well my father knew, that with Major Mortimer living he was your legal husband, and hence he must die."

"To save my father, now I know, and myself, you sought to revenge the past by killing Mortimer, and sent my father to New Orleans to find the man you then knew was at his own home."

"Then you sent Toby for him; he met you at the Magnolia Arbor, and you forced him to fight you, and he fell dead."

"Then I did kill him?"

"Then I am not mad?"

She fairly shrieked the words, and sprung

to her feet, clutching him by either shoulder with intense excitement.

"Be calm, mother," he said, sternly.

"I'll be calm, Percy, oh! so calm, only tell me that I am not mad," she pleaded, sinking back into her chair.

CHAPTER L.

UNITED ONCE MORE.

"No, mother, you are not mad," said Percy Wyndham, impressively, in answer to the urgent appeal of his mother for him to tell her the truth.

"God bless you, my son, for those words; but tell me, why have you so made me believe?" she added, reproachfully.

"Mother, listen to me, and see if I sinned, and if sinning there is not palliation.

"You forced Major Mortimer into a duel with you, and in killing him you avenged the past, and gave to me, your son, an honorable name.

"But you stained your fair woman's hands with the life of one whom it should have fallen to the lot of my father, or myself, to have killed.

"Killing him as you did, you wiped out the dishonor, to suddenly find, through Phoebe's confession, that she had given to Major Mortimer a pistol that contained no bullet.

"The poor girl did this to save you.

"She knew the deadly aim of the man you faced, and she said that she saw in his eyes a determination to kill you.

"She trusted in your superb marksmanship also, mother, but she determined to guard against all accident of danger to you, and hence poor Phoebe's act.

"Her confession to you of what she had done, brought in a flood upon you that you had shot down an unarmed man, and it overwhelmed you, sending the blood in such torrents to your heart, that you swooned away, and fell by the side of the man you had justly slain.

"At that moment I arrived, and in a word, as well as he could, Toby told me all.

"But before I could say a word, or act, up rode Merton Massey and his son.

"Could I allow you to suffer, my mother?

"Could I let the brand of that duel fall upon you?

"Would I have it said that you had aught to avenge against any man?

"Oh no, mother! hence I took upon myself the name of having slain Major Mortimer, and better a thousand times that they should believe you mad, than know the whole bitter secret which would have been told.

"As you seemed determined to make all known in your excitement, I kept up the deception, forcing Toby, Nance and Phoebe to do the same, and in time I intended to make all known to you, as soon as you got over the intense excitement into which it had thrown you.

"Now, mother, let the dead past be buried, and pledge me that you let all remain as it is, or forever will I leave Lakelands."

"Gladly I promise you, my son, and forgive you all, for it was for the best by far that the death of Mark Mortimer, though at my hands, fell not upon my fair name, for then, as you say, the shame would come upon all of us."

For a moment after she had thus spoken both were silent, and then the son asked quietly:

"Mother, tell me now of yourself, for I have been searching for you all these weeks."

In a few words she told him all that had occurred, and how Bessie Gito had brought her to her home, and both the maiden and her father had treated her with the utmost kindness, keeping from all the secret of the Ghost of the Lagoon.

And more she told him, and that was of poor Bessie, and the false marriage which Mark Mortimer had deceived her with, for the young girl had laid bare her inmost heart to Mrs. Wyndham, whom she had learned to love as though she had been her own mother.

"And Mark Mortimer has thus wronged this beautiful girl, following in his sinful father's footsteps?" asked Percy Wyndham, in suppressed tones.

"He has, Percy."

"Where is Bessie now?"

"She rode over to the village, but I expect her back soon."

"And her father?"

"Left in his sloop yesterday for Pensacola, to be gone a couple of weeks, he said."

"Very well; then we will all take a little cruise without him, for I want you to go to New Orleans with me, mother, and Bessie must accompany you, for the trip will do your health good, and Phoebe can go, too, and we will sail in my new yacht, which I suppose you have heard how I captured!"

"Yes, I know of your daring capture of the pirates, Percy, for Bessie has told me all."

"But there comes Bessie now."

The maiden just then dashed up upon her little pony, and was delighted to see Percy, as he stepped forward to aid her to alight.

Gladly she accepted the invitation for the cruise in the Jack-o'-lantern, and soon after Percy took his departure, promising to come in the yacht for them the following night, for Mrs. Wyndham said she did not care to return home until after her voyage to New Orleans.

True to his word, Percy ran the Jack-o'-lantern into the little harbor the next night, and Mrs. Wyndham and Bessie were rowed on board, where they found all in readiness to receive them, and Nance and Phoebe wild with delight at seeing their mistress once more.

CHAPTER LI.

AN INSULT.

I WILL now return to the gambling saloon in New Orleans, the night upon which Mark Mortimer had decided to return home, and luck had so thoroughly set against him.

It was a resort of the most aristocratic kind, where only well-known gentlemen were allowed to enter, and the proprietor of which had been compelled to stand a great deal of joking, on account of Frank Forrester having been one of his favorite guests, and who turned out to be a pirate.

Gentlemen who did not gamble were often wont to drop in the saloon of an evening to meet some friend who did, so that it was nothing against a man to see him there, and therefore the commodore, in whose company Percy Wyndham had gone there, felt that it was no detriment to himself to drop in in a friendly way.

He had met Percy at the hotel, and had gone on board his yacht with him, at the youth's invitation to dine there, and had met Mrs. Wyndham and Bessie; and been charmed with them, while he had extolled the courage of the young planter to the skies and told him he had orders from the Government to offer him a naval lieutenancy, should he be willing to accept it.

But Percy declined with thanks, and after dinner on board the Jack-o'-lantern, he and Commodore Nevilte had gone up town to the gambling saloon, where Mark Mortimer had seen him with amazement, just as he was about to give up all idea of then finding him.

"By Neptune! but now I know why I have had the ill fortune that has haunted me to-night.

"It is the presence of that fellow near me," he hissed through his set teeth.

As if determining suddenly upon some course to pursue, he turned again to the table, and began to play heavily.

"There is an interesting game going on, Wyndham; let us overlook it," said Commodore Nevilte, as he drew Percy toward the table where a crowd was gathering, interested in the heavy playing of Mark Mortimer, who had again begun to win.

They drew near, and then Percy recognized who the player was, for he had not noticed him before.

Walking around facing him, he stood with the commodore, the latter watching intently the game, the former with his eye upon the man.

The instant Percy Wyndham took his stand, Mark Mortimer saw him, and a frown passed over his brow, while, to his amazement the game went against him.

The next was likewise lost by him, and in sheer desperation he threw down a large sum and wagered it.

He lost, and angry and worried he again played and lost.

With a face that was livid he arose to his feet and looking Percy squarely in the face, cried in loud angry tones:

"An angel could have no luck when a murderer was gazing into his face and destroying it with his basilisk eyes."

All saw to whom the remark was addressed, and many present knew Percy Wyndham and had heard of the vendetta between his name and the Mortimers.

Commodore Nevilte had only seen Mark Mortimer that night to know him, having asked of a bystander who he was; but the name had brought up the Mortimer Wyndham vendetta, and he was just about to draw Percy away, when the insult was given.

"As you look at me, sir, it is to be presumed you mean your language for me," said Percy in the coolest tones imaginable.

"If you are not a coward, sir, you will understand to whom I allude as the murderer of my father," was the bitter response.

Percy was pale, but perfectly calm, and answered:

"I wish not to misunderstand you, Mr. Mortimer, and if you will name your friend, I will have mine call upon him."

"Captain Norton, sir, of the City Guard," was the reply of Mark Mortimer, to the surprise of Percy, who had intended seeking that very gentleman to ask him to become his second, as he did not know the captain had been cultivating his enemy during his last stay in the city until the two had become quite intimate.

But Percy bowed at the mention of the name and walked away with the commodore, who said, as soon as the two were out of the saloon:

"Percy, my young friend, I intend to offer my services to you in this affair, which was certainly one of the most unprovoked insults ever offered."

Percy was agreeably surprised at securing the services of so distinguished a personage, and answered:

"From my heart I thank you, sir; but I came here to seek Mr. Mortimer, and he saved me the trouble of looking him up."

"I have but one request to make as to this meeting, and that is, as my yacht lies in the river, that we descend the Mississippi in her a league, and have the duel at some good spot on the bank."

"Will he accede to this?"

"He must, sir, for I have a motive in it which will transpire."

"And more, commodore, do not allow him to suspect that there will be other on the yacht than you, myself and crew."

"Certainly, Percy, but do you wish to make a stand about weapons?"

"He can select any that suits him best, Commodore Nevilte; but, if you urge for the meeting to be down the river, and to go in my yacht, he will yield, or rather Norton will for him, as I feel assured the captain is playing a deep game for some purpose in professing friendship for him."

"It shall be as you wish, Percy," and the commodore departed to look up Captain Norton and arrange a meeting for a duel that was to wipe out the insult given.

CHAPTER LII.

A TWO-FOLD TRIUMPH.

"SWORDS are the weapons chosen, Percy; the time, this evening, about sunset; and the place on the Mississippi bank, about a league below the city, as you desired," said Commodore Nevilte, coming on board the Jack-o'-lantern to a late breakfast the morning after the insult in the gambling saloon.

"All right, commodore, and I thank you. But do all go down on my yacht?"

"Yes; though it seems Mortimer fought against it to such an extent that he sent Captain Norton to my quarters early this morning to urge that the place of meeting be changed to inland; but the captain and myself talked it over, and the result is that he and Mortimer, with a surgeon, will come down in a sail-boat.

"Mortimer wanted witnesses of all who cared to go, it seems, the captain told me this morning, but I vetoed that most peremptorily."

"Thank you, sir," returned Percy, and leaving the commodore to be entertained by his mother and Bessie after breakfast, he rowed ashore and was gone for several hours.

Early in the afternoon, however, he returned, and a stranger accompanied him that looked as though he was a surgeon, for he carried a carpet-sack in his hand that appeared heavy, as if surgical instruments might be the contents.

The yacht soon after got under way and dropped down the Mississippi under a light breeze to a point where the bank seemed to invite a landing to rest under the majestic live-oak trees there to be seen.

Here she was moored close to the bank, and

Commodore Nevilte and Percy went on shore, accompanied by Caleb bearing a handsome sword-case, as well as a box of dueling-pistols.

They had not long to wait before a boat was seen pulling down the river, urged by two negro oarsmen, and in the stern-sheets were three persons, two of whom Percy recognized at a glance as his enemy and Captain Norton. The third person he did not remember to have seen before.

"My dear Percy, I hope you are a good swordsman," said Commodore Nevilte, anxiously, as the boat touched the shore, "for I have made some inquiries about Mortimer, and hear that he is a superb hand with a blade, and intends to kill you."

"If he can, commodore, he is welcome to do so," was the reply, with a smile that reassured the old naval officer.

As the three gentlemen approached all bowed politely, Mark Mortimer raising his hat in response to a like act on the part of Percy Wyndham.

He was pale, but his face was coldly cruel, stern and determined, while the expression upon the countenance of Percy Wyndham was one of utter indifference, it seemed.

Captain Norton greeted Percy with a bow and a smile, and the third one of the party prepared for work by coolly laying a case of surgical instruments out ready for use.

The swords of each duelist were then examined, and the weapons brought by Percy were selected as most superior blades, and to his enemy he generously offered a choice between them.

Mark Mortimer took both in his hand, tried them to the bent of his humor, and pitched one to Captain Norton as his choice.

The commodore then took the other blade, and handed it to Percy, who walked to his stand with the same air of indifference he had shown throughout.

A moment after Mark Mortimer faced him, and stood glaring into his eyes with a look the very personification of hatred of the bitterest kind.

At a signal from the commodore, the blades crossed, and at once was begun a most masterly feat of arms, for both men surely were adepts in the use of the weapons they held.

It could be seen by all after a few passes that Mark Mortimer was looking very black, for he had expected a victory from the first, and it fretted him to find one who could coolly parry his thrusts, as no other man had ever done.

He had known Percy Wyndham to be a dead shot, but he had not expected so much perfection in his handling a sword, and Duke, who had come down in the boat, now approached nearer, feeling some dread for the fate of his master.

While Mark Mortimer grew more irritable each instant, Percy Wyndham still held the same calm, indifferent demeanor, and, as if not caring to have the affair continue longer, he at once began to press his foe.

From the offensive, Mark Mortimer was compelled to quickly switch over to the defensive, and all saw that he turned livid with fury, when he realized that the one before him was his master with the sword, while Duke drew nearer and seemed painfully nervous about the result.

As Percy pressed his adversary harder, the old commodore smiled in spite of himself, and something very like an emphatic oath dropped from his lips, when he saw the blade of Mark Mortimer struck from his hand, by a brilliant movement, and the sharp point of Percy Wyndham's weapon thrust against the body of his foe, just over his heart.

"Mr. Mortimer, for the sake of your sister, and because you have a duty to perform, I give you your life."

"Otherwise I would kill you as you deserve, and if you do not do as I now demand of you, I will use my prerogative, made by yourself, that this was to be a duel to the death and no mercy asked or given, and will kill you."

Percy spoke in clear, earnest tones, still holding his sword-point just over Mark Mortimer's heart, and all gathered around in intense wonder, while the defeated man cried angrily:

"In Satan's name what do you demand?"

In answer, Percy Wyndham gave a long, shrill whistle, and instantly off of the yacht, a cable's length away, came three persons.

At a glance it was evident that Mark Mortimer recognized one of them, for he spoke the name with a muttered curse.

That one was Bessie Gito, and the other two were Mrs. Wyndham and a priest in his robes.

They came at a swift walk to the spot, Bessie dressed in pure white, and Mrs. Wyndham in deep black.

Halting near, they looked at Mark Mortimer and then at Percy, as though wishing him to speak.

"Mr. Mortimer," he said, while Bessie became very pale and trembled violently:

"You will recognize this lady as one whose love you won and then inveigled her into a false marriage."

"It is not true," savagely said the man at bay.

"You so told her with your own lips, and though she utterly casts you off as unworthy of her love, she at least is entitled to your name in a legal sense, and for her honor's sake, I demand that you give it to her."

"Here is a priest to unite you, and these gentlemen will bear witness that this is no mock marriage."

"I will not be forced into any such a damnable act," was the angry retort of the infuriated man.

"Padre, take your stand there, please."

"Bessie, come here," said Percy, quietly. Both obeyed, and then turning once more to Mark Mortimer, Percy Wyndham continued:

"Mark Mortimer, this holy father is ready to unite you, and, so help me God, if you refuse, I will use my right, according to the terms of our duel, and run you through the heart."

"Speak, sir! for not an instant do I give you to decide."

Mark Mortimer saw that he was in a trap; he loved life, and he yielded as gracefully as he could by bowing his head in assent.

The padre then performed the marriage service, and with the last word Bessie said sternly:

"Now, Mark Mortimer, go your way, and never again cross my path."

He turned on his heel, and, without a word, but with a look at Percy Wyndham that spoke volumes, walked away, accompanied by Captain Norton, his second, and his faithful slave, Duke, while the Jack-o'-lantern, after returning to the city and leaving the commodore and the priest, spread her white wings for the run back to Lakelands.

CHAPTER LIII.

JUAN GITO'S FATE.

AFTER a pleasant run, the Jack-o'-lantern dropped anchor in Lakelands harbor, and Bessie Gito accepted the invitation of Mrs. Wyndham to remain at the mansion at least for the night.

Little dreaming how slight a thing sometimes alters the whole current of our lives, Bessie remained at Lakelands, for she did not believe her father had yet returned from Pensacola.

But Juan Gito had returned, and, finding his daughter gone, had that very evening the Jack-o'-lantern arrived gone over to The Everglades to seek Mark Mortimer and demand of him reparation for the wrong he had done his daughter, for he knew not that Percy Wyndham had forced him to right the wrong.

Mark Mortimer, humbled by his defeat in his duel with Percy Wyndham, and knowing that it would be soon over town that he had been disarmed and his life given him, determined to at once sail for home.

His yacht lay out at the laka, and securing a vehicle, he drove out there with Duke as soon as he returned from his duel.

Instantly the Glide spread her sails, and arrived several days in advance of the Jack-o'-lantern, who had to descend the river and then run round.

Mabel greeted him coldly, yet not unkindly, and could see that something had gone wrong with him.

That this was the case, the servants at the place soon discovered, too, for the young master was as irritable as a caged tiger.

"A man to see you, sir," said Duke, one evening just as the sun was going down, and when the Jack-o'-lantern was just going into the Lakelands haven upon her return.

"Who is he?" asked Mark, fearing it might be some one to inquire regarding the missing constable, Daniel Dustan.

"The cliff fisherman, sir."

"Juan Gito?"

"Yes, master."

"Tell him I cannot see him."

The message was delivered, and Mark Mortimer was again interrupted in his reveries by the appearance of Duke.

"Well?" he said, impatiently.

"He says you *must* see him, master."

"Must, says he? Well, tell him I say to go to Purgatory," was the savage response.

Duke faithfully delivered this insulting message, and Juan Gito turned away and went back toward his little boat.

But, with the shadows of night, he came cautiously back toward the mansion, gained the piazza, and suddenly entered the library, into which the servant had a moment before brought lights.

Mark Mortimer had excused himself from the tea table, and was pacing to and fro in the library, engaged in bitter thought, when suddenly he was confronted by Juan Gito.

"Furies! have you dared come here after my refusal to see you?" he said, with savage manner.

"Yes, for who are you, Mark Mortimer, that a man, whose daughter you bitterly wronged, dare not face you in your own home?" was the stern and deep response.

"Begone, Spanish dog, or I will call my slaves to hurl you into the Gulf."

"Bah! you will do no such thing, Mark Mortimer, for I will tell those same slaves, and the world too, that you twice came to my cabin in disguise, and bribed me by a handsome sum to kill your sweet sister, as your father's will gives you her fortune at her death."

"See! Do you recognize this ring you gave me as security until my money was paid?"

Juan Gito held forth, as he spoke, a diamond ring of rare worth, and with a bound Mark Mortimer was upon him.

But the fisherman nimbly eluded him, and drawing his knife, cried:

"Back! or I will kill you, for I thirst for your blood to avenge my child's honor."

Instantly Mark Mortimer thrust his hand into his bosom, and it returned with a pistol.

A flash and report followed, and with a cry of anguish Juan Gito fell dead upon the library floor, just as Mabel, Duke and several of the house servants dashed in.

"That devil attacked me, Mabel, and I killed him."

"But I must away until the affair blows over, for he is most popular along the coast with men of his class."

"Get my crew on board the Glide at once, Duke, and you accompany me."

"Good-bye, Mabel, and when I have gone send over and report this affair, and mind you, say I did it in self-defense."

He left the room as he spoke, sought his own chamber, and half an hour after the Glide sped swiftly out of the little harbor, leaving behind her a scene of woe for poor Mabel to face.

CHAPTER LIV.

CONCLUSION.

IT was a bitter blow to Bessie Gito, when she was awakened at an early hour by Mrs. Wyndham, who had just been informed by her son of the tragedy at The Everglades, and told that her father was dead, and by the hand of the man she had loved with all the idolatry of her nature.

She turned to the hue and coldness of marble, when Mrs. Wyndham, in low, sympathetic words, told her of her father's death; but when it was made known to her how he died, her eyes fairly blazed with passion, and she hissed forth:

"My father killed by Mark Mortimer!"

"The wrong he did me I could have forgiven; but that act of his I pray Almighty God I may never forget, waking, sleeping, dying, and if I forgive it, may a curse forever rest upon my grave."

Mrs. Wyndham and Percy did all in their power to soothe her; but she paced the floor like an enraged tigress, and demanded that she be taken at once to The Everglades.

"Mr. Mortimer is not there," said Percy, comprehending her motive.

"Where is he?" she sternly asked.

"He sailed in his yacht last night, an hour after the deed was committed, I am told," answered Percy.

"Then my father's body lies beneath the accursed roof of his murderer, and I will have that, and carry it to my own home."

In vain they urged that she remain at Lakelands, and Percy Wyndham said he would himself go after the body, and give it a decent

burial from his own home; but she was determined, and at last Percy called for the plantation launch, and a crew and himself escorted poor Bessie to the landing at The Everglades.

As he urged it, she consented to remain in the launch, while he and four negroes went up to the mansion for the body.

At the last moment before starting in his yacht, Mark Mortimer had told Duke to remain so as to be able to serve him the better, if necessary, and it was that haughty negro that met him at the door.

Upon his face was a sinister smile as Percy Wyndham stepped forward, but unheeding the negro's manner, the young planter asked:

"Is Mr. Mark Mortimer in?"

"He is not in."

"Who is in authority here in his absence, for I care not to disturb Miss Mortimer at such a time?"

"I am, sir."

Percy gave the insolent negro a look that made him quail slightly, for there was that in the young planter's manner that told him he dared not go too far, while he said sternly:

"You are but a slave, whom I will teach his proper place if need be."

"Thank you, Mr. Wyndham, for the rebuke to this negro, whom my brother left behind him."

"Duke, go to the quarters and wait there until I order you to leave them," and Mabel swept up to the door looking grandly beautiful in her dark dress, which caused her face to look even more pale than it was.

The negro looked as though he would not obey for an instant; but seeing the burning eye of Percy Wyndham upon him, he turned away, while Mabel said sadly:

"Ah, Mr. Wyndham, is this not a sad, a terrible affair?"

"It is indeed, Miss Mortimer, and I regret to disturb you at such a moment; but poor Bessie Gito has begged me to come for her father's body, and she awaits it in the launch."

"The body lies in the library, Mr. Wyndham, where I had it brought back, for Duke had ordered it to the quarters.

"Present to poor Bessie from me my deepest heartfelt sympathy in her sorrow."

She bowed, while her eyes filled with tears, and glided away, while Percy Wyndham entered the darkened library, and had his slaves bear the body of Bessie's father to the launch. Words cannot depict the grief of poor Bessie when the dead form was laid beside her.

Not a tear did she shed, not a sigh escaped her; but she clasped the cold hands in her own, almost as icy to the touch, and held them until the launch arrived at the landing of Cliff Cottage.

Tenderly the body was borne to the little home and laid in the pretty sitting-room, and then Bessie commanded that she be left alone with her dead for the day, but for Percy and his mother, as they had promised, to come at sunset to aid in laying her father away in his grave, which should be near the cabin, the maiden said.

In vain was it that Percy urged that two of his negroes should remain and dig the grave, for she would not permit it, and declared that she would be alone for the day.

With deep sorrow in his heart for the poor girl, Percy returned homeward, to make all preparations for the burial in the evening.

But a storm followed him to Lakelands, and burst with terrific fury along the shores.

All day long it continued, and no boat could get out in such a blow, and in dismay for the poor mourning girl, the young planter tried to gain Cliff Cottage by land, laying the coffin in a wagon.

But the storm had driven the lagoons beyond their banks, and that way to the cabin was impassable too.

All night long Percy Wyndham and his mother sat in the grand library of Lakelands, listening to the howling tempest, and pitying the sorrowing, lonely girl, wholly alone with her dead, and they prayed and hoped for the storm to blow itself out.

But it was late the following day before it died away sufficient for a boat to live in the rough waters, and then Percy Wyndham, his mother and a stanch crew boarded the Jack-o'-lantern, which, close-reefed, was able to beat out with difficulty.

At last the little harbor was reached, a landing was effected, and with his slaves bearing the coffin, the young planter and his mother started for the house.

But no answer came to their knock, the door was unlocked, and they entered.

But no dead form met their gaze, nor was Bessie to be seen anywhere.

The interior of the cabin looked as usual, though some things seemed to have been disturbed.

Then upon a table the eye of Percy Wyndham fell upon a slip of paper.

Hastily he seized and read what was written thereon.

It was as follows:

"I bury my dead in the sea he loved so well, and to-day go forth to wreak revenge upon the one who brought a curse upon my life, and who made me fatherless and alone in the world."

"For what revenge may drive me to, may God pity and forgive me."

"BESSIE GITO."

This was all that was ever heard more of Bessie Gito, the Lady of the Lagoon; but there were many whispers upon sea and land that a band of pirates were commanded by a woman known as Buccaneer Bess, and that she was strangely like the fair maid of Cliff Cottage.

As for Mark Mortimer, he, too, mysteriously disappeared, after a meteoric career in New Orleans, and some said he had become an officer upon the Red Rover, a buccaneer vessel many asserted was commanded by none other than the Skimmer of the Seas, also known as the Gambler Pirate.

And Percy Wyndham and his sad-faced mother lived on in seclusion at Lakelands, seemingly caring little for the outer world; but those who could have seen into the inmost heart of the young planter would have found imaged there the lovely face of Mabel Mortimer, who was loved by all as deeply as was her brother hated, and whose noble deeds of charity gained for her the well-deserved name of the Angel of The Everglades.

But between those two, the master of Lakelands and the heiress of The Everglades, was a "great gulf fixed," across which neither dare stretch forth the hand of love for fear it would clasp the bony fingers of a skeleton.

THE END.

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